

IMAR Y. KOUTCHOUKALI

“Our *‘irbīt* is not like your *‘arabiyya*”

Linguistic and Socio-Political Change
in Late Antique South Arabia (550 – 850 AD)



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i. Introduction

The two centuries between the last pre-Islamic South Arabian inscriptions and the first documentary evidence from the Islamic period represent the largest temporal break in the history of this region. The eminent scholar of Yemen, Gerald Rex-Smith phrased this as “one of the great frustrations” for scholars working on South Arabia’s early Islamic history (Smith 2002:273).

This frustration is particularly great for the two following reasons. Firstly, there is a vast amount of written evidence from South Arabia in the form of inscriptions written on rock, metal, and wood, ceramics, and other material (Stein 2005:121–31). Documents in Akkadian, Greek, Syriac, Latin, and various other languages of the ancient and antique Middle East supplement this local tradition. In other words, the history of South Arabia is fairly well-described up until the middle of the 6th century AD. For the two centuries following, barely any primary sources exist.

Secondly, this period saw some of the most drastic changes to South Arabia’s socio-political, religious, and linguistic character. By the 6th century AD, the Sabaean-Himyarite political system had existed for over a millennium. Seemingly overnight, this political system ended. Up until that moment, the region’s political rulers had left records of their deeds in the form of the South Arabian inscriptions, written in the Sabaic language. Sabaic, too, disappeared, albeit not without leaving traces of its existence in the Arabic dialects spoken in Yemen. That this period also saw the emergence of Islam and the integration of South Arabia into the Islamic polity is likely not a coincidence.

Yet it is still not clear how South Arabia became a part of Islam. The French scholar Maxime Rodinson (2004:47), keenly aware of the linguistic and cultural differences between South and Central-North Arabia, asserted that “after the triumph of Islam, begun by a Saracen, the South Arabians were rapidly Arabized”.¹ However, Rodinson does not explain what “Arabization” meant: that is to say, whether this was a process was a linguistic or a cultural one. If he intended the latter, then this would suggest the existence of a cohesive notion of a distinct “Arab” culture that spread to South Arabia either concurrently or shortly after South Arabia had become Islamic.

If Rodinson intended that this was a process of linguistic change, then his claim can be falsified. Although Rex Smith’s assertion regarding the dearth of information may hold true for documentary and archaeological material, there is no lack of indirect linguistic evidence. Medieval Islamic scholars tell us that some strange foreign-sounded language, apparently unintelligible to an Arabic ear, continued to be spoken in Islamic Yemen. And to this day, the dialects of Arabic spoken in South Arabia paradoxically exhibit some of the most conservative and divergent features found in Arabic.

¹ “Après le triomphe de l’Islam que menait un Saracène, les Sudarabiques furent rapidement arabisés”.

The pertinent questions are the following: how do we interpret the linguistic evidence, and can this help us better understand the socio-political change in South Arabia during the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods?

This dissertation seeks a new approach to fill the void of information about South Arabia between the 6th and 8th centuries AD and does so by analyzing the linguistic evidence pertaining to this region. This linguistic evidence consists of three main sources. Firstly, the epigraphic corpus, represented by circa 15 000 inscriptions written in a variety of languages and on different materials. Secondly, the medieval Islamic tradition, consisting of works of poetry, lexicography, history, and more. And thirdly, material from modern dialectological research.

The dissertation is divided into the following chapters: the first chapter lays out the socio-political context of South Arabia between the 5th and 8th centuries AD, focusing specifically on aspects of social organization – i.e., tribal organization, the nature of state formation and the role of religion – as well as on the history and development of political organization during the Late Antique period. It demonstrates how various claimants to South Arabia during this period relied on the same forms of political authority – expressed by the appropriation of the Sabaean political tradition and the Sabaean language – to legitimize their rule.

The second and third chapter further delve into South Arabia as a linguistic area. The second chapter provides a broad overview of the various languages in use in South Arabia during the Late Antique period (c. 200 – 800 AD) and their most important characteristics. The third chapter focuses on the shared features of the South Arabian linguistic area and proposes a tentative theory as to how language contact in South Arabia took place.

The fifth chapter seeks to place linguistic change in its broader social contexts. It discusses how South Arabia came to be a part of the Islamic world and how it was integrated into the rest of Arabia on a cultural level. Furthermore, it analyzes the importance of South Arabia's linguistic character in creating a distinct South Arabian identity during the early Islamic period.

ii. Source material

The previous section noted that there are three main sources of linguistic evidence. These are the following:

- a. Pre-Islamic epigraphy
- b. Medieval Islamic scholarship
- c. Contemporary Arabic dialectology

Most of the source material used in this dissertation consists of written sources. These are broadly divided into the pre-Islamic South Arabian epigraphic corpora and early Islamic scholarship on the other.

The former consists largely, but not exclusively, of monumental inscriptions of political nature. Besides this, in South Arabia there developed a tradition of cursive writing on palm leaf sticks (ar. *zabūr*), which were used to communicate legal, mercantile, and personal matters. Secondly, other epigraphic material from this period exists in the form of graffiti, personal, spontaneous, and less ideologically motivated texts. Most of the epigraphic material is written in Late Sabaic, an Epigraphic South Arabian language. Some epigraphic texts representing different languages, particularly written in North Arabian varieties and Old Arabic, will also be considered where relevant.

The Arabic-language material from the early Islamic period represents a broad variety of genres. This ranges from exegetical material to travelogues and historical writing to poetry. The Arabic lexicographical tradition is in this sense especially important. It must be noted that many different genres may be found in the same work; for example, al-Hamdānī's *Ṣifat ǧazīrat al-ʿarab*, ostensibly a description of the Arabian Peninsula, apart from being replete with references to the region's natural geography but draws heavily on poetry and other forms of literature.

A third source of information consists of Arabic dialectological research, specifically of those variants of Arabic spoken in South Arabia. The Arabic dialects spoken in Yemen represent, at the same time, some of the most conservative and idiosyncratic forms of Arabic in the world. As a result, Arabic dialectology represents a further important source on which this dissertation relies.

Occasionally, some sources are composed in a variety of ancient languages, such as Latin, Greek, Classical Ethiopic (Gəʿəz), Akkadian, Hebrew, Aramaic, and others. Many (though not all) of the authors of these inscriptions had never travelled to South Arabia and therefore relied on second- or third-hand information. Nevertheless, these sources can help shed light on some of the more obscure parts of South Arabia's history.

iii. State of the art

The issue of linguistic change in late pre-Islamic and early Islamic South Arabia has not yet been systematically studied. Although studies related to linguistic change and language contact in South Arabia have been undertaken, these have mostly focused on (a) South Arabian cultural-religious influences on the Quran and early Islam, particularly loanwords; (b) South Arabian linguistic particularities described during the medieval period and/or (c) lexical correspondences between the epigraphic material and varieties of Arabic spoken in South Arabia to this day.

(a) The cultural impact of pre-Islamic South Arabia on the Arabian Peninsula as a whole has long been acknowledged and possibly even overstated. It is no coincidence that in his *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, Julius Wellhausen begins his discussion of the Jewish and Christian history of the Arabian Peninsula in the Southwest (1897:230). Nöldeke (1910), too, refers to a Christian presence in South Arabia, although does not discuss it in much detail in his *Geschichte des Qorans*, but acknowledges the possibility of South Arabian (essentially Sabaic) loanwords in his *Zur Sprache des Korans*. As the field of Quranic studies progressed throughout the beginning of the 20th century, Arthur Jeffery published his *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān*, which has 77 references to South Arabian, again predominantly Sabaic, lexemes.² Jacques Jomier (1957) suggested the possibility that the Quranic term al-Raḥmān was borrowed as a deity from South Arabia and suggested that the northern Arabian deity Allāh and the South Arabian Raḥmānān were actively syncretized during the Prophet's lifetime.³ This theory has found some careful support in more recent scholarship too: Al-Jallad (2022:16) stresses the importance of overlapping monotheistic trends on Arabia around the emergence of Islam, while Samji (2013:92–93) suggests that Muhammad's adoption of the term *al-Raḥmān* was a conscious effort to unite different religious communities in western Arabia.

In the past two decades, the social and linguistic milieu in which the Quran came into being has received renewed scholarly attention. Both Neuwirth's *The Quran in Context* and Reynold's *The Quran in its Historical Context*, published within three years of each other, have separate chapters dedicated to South Arabia. The former contains one chapter (Nebes 2010) focusing on the socio-political events in South Arabia in the decades preceding the birth of the Prophet Muhammad and the possibility of their influence on the Quran. Another chapter (Stein 2010) concerns the importance of epigraphy in establishing the degree of literacy

² It must be noted though that although Jeffery's *Foreign Vocabulary* remains an invaluable source, it is very much a product of its time. Apart from the fact that Jeffery has a rather essentialist attitude towards the Arabia of the 6th/7th century, as Pennacchio points out, the scholars of the late 19th and early 20th century were not working within the framework of contemporary historical linguistics (Pennacchio 2011).

³ Translated and re-published in Rippin's *The Qur'an: Style and Contents* (Rippin 2001).

on the Arabian Peninsula during the pre-Islamic period. In the second volume of Reynold's *The Quran in its Historical Context*, Hoyland (2008) and Hayajneh (Hayajneh 2011) contribute two articles focusing on the role of epigraphy: the former outlining Jewish inscriptions in western Arabia and the latter on the etymological value of (South) Arabian epigraphy in Quranic lexicography. Furthermore, Quranic references to South Arabian locations, characters and events are mentioned in the doctoral dissertation of Suleyman Dost (2017).

(b) Evidence of linguistic continuity between the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods in South Arabia has been known in western scholarship at least since the time of Müller's publication *Die Burgen und Schlösser Südarabiens* (1879). In the introduction to this work, Müller states:

“Selbstverständlich war ich bestrebt, die Angaben Hamdānī's durch Heranziehung des epigraphischen Materials, durch die Nachrichten der arabischen Geographen, wie der modernen Reisenden zu erläutern und zu vervollständigen“

Some years later, when De Goeje published his first translations of al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīḥ*, the field of South Arabian studies had advanced far enough for him to occasionally include references to epigraphic material.⁴

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century more South Arabian inscriptions were discovered and deciphered, and a tentative chronology for the different stages of the Sabaic language was established.⁵ The clear break between Late Sabaic and Arabic as the region's official language led to the question as to how this process took place. To answer this question, scholars have mainly focused on describing what medieval Muslim scholars came to refer to as Himyaritic, a term clearly derived from South Arabia's final indigenous dynasty.

Many studies that identify specific medieval Himyaritic words and sought to identify the corresponding South Arabian forms were conducted over the past century.⁶ A significant contribution to this field was al-Selwī's doctoral thesis, *Jemenitische Wörter in den Werken von al-Hamdānī und Našwān und ihre Parallelen in den semitischen Sprachen*. Anna Belova's 1996 monograph *Химьяритский язык: Ареальные исследования к истории арабского языка* ('The Himyaritic language: regional studies on the history of an Arabian language') is one of the most thorough investigations of the available pre-Islamic epigraphic

⁴ For example, in his discussion of the penultimate Himyarite ruler, De Goeje notes that the name Laḥṭ'at is attested in the pre-Islamic South Arabian epigraphy (*Ihy'ūt*).

⁵ Paleographic changes and contextual clues allow for the division of the stages of the South Arabian script into three distinct historical stages, old (800 – 300 BC), middle (300 – 300 AD) and late (300 – 600 AD).

⁶ For example, Saliba's 1985 "A medieval note on the Himyaritic dialect", Elmaz' South Arabian words in *Kitāb al-ʿayn*. Broader overviews include Stein's "The Himyaritic Language in pre-Islamic Yemen: a Critical Re-Evaluation". Robin, too, discusses the medieval "Himyaritic" in his *Les inscriptions de l'Arabie antique et les études arabes*.

and medieval documentary material on the linguistic situation in early Islamic South Arabia (Belova 1996, Robin 2011b:259).

As the general understanding of South Arabian epigraphy improved and more medieval Arabic texts became available, the question whether the medieval scholars' 'Himyaritic' reflected a direct continuation of the language(s) of the pre-Islamic inscriptions or a different linguistic stratum became ever more important. Stein summarizes the two viewpoints concerning this discussion as follows: either the language of the Late Sabaic inscriptions represents a spoken language or it is an artificial register that differed from the authors' daily language.

Robin (2001:522, 2007:256–7), who noted that the presence of undeciphered South Arabian inscriptions from central and southern Yemen that differed from the Sabaic language found in the official inscriptions. Robin suggests that the language spoken by the Himyarites was not Sabaic, but simultaneously allows for the possibility that these inscriptions do not fully reflect the spoken Himyaritic language either.

However, as Stein (2008:208–209) notes, there is little evidence to suggest that the spoken language of the Late Sabaic period in South Arabia differed drastically from the language of the inscriptions. Firstly, the language of the miniscule inscriptions does not vary significantly from that of the monumental inscriptions. Secondly, the degree of linguistic continuity between what the medieval scholars came to term 'Himyaritic' and (Late) Sabaic renders it unlikely that the former was based on a different spoken language of the pre-Islamic period. Furthermore, the undeciphered inscriptions that Robin refers to have been recognized as Sabaic, and some have already received (tentative) translations. (Daum, 'Abdullāh, and al-Iryānī 2023)

(c) With the beginnings of South Arabian dialectology,⁷ which functionally started with the investigations of Carlo Landberg in 1901, scholars began to point out correspondences between the modern Arabic dialects of the region and the languages of the pre-Islamic inscriptions. Most of such work has focused purely on identifying lexical items attested in the epigraphy and Yemen's contemporary dialects. Normally, these works will also refer to the medieval Himyaritic, if correspondences can be found therein. Examples of such studies include the aforementioned monography by al-Selwi, as well as Müller's article "Sabaic lexical survivals in the Arabic language and dialects of Yemen" (2014), as well as Behnstedt's "Lexikalisches aus dem Jemen" (1988) and "Zum bestimmten Artikel und Ortsnamenskunde im Jemen" (2007). Dedicated studies of Southwest Arabian Arabic varieties also often include references to correspondences in the pre-

⁷ Meaning in the western tradition; awareness of the linguistic oddities of southwest Arabia is well-established in the Islamic lexicographic tradition (see, for example Ibn Manẓūr (p. 993: *wa-ḥammara r-raḡulu: takallama bi-kalāmi ḥimyarā wa-lahum ʾalfāzun wa-luḡātun tuḥālifu luḡāti sāʾiri l-ʿarabi*, i.e., "the man who Himyarizes: he speaks in the language of the Himyarites, who have languages that differ from the vernacular of the Arabs").

Islamic epigraphic corpora. Examples include Behnstedt's *Die Dialekte der Gegend von Ṣaʿdah* (1987) and Watson's *A Syntax of Ṣanʿānī Arabic* (1993).

As Arabic dialectology grew more comprehensive and began incorporating approaches from general linguistic scholarship, this kind of research became more systematic. An example of a systematic overview of Yemeni Arabic isoglosses is Behnstedt's *Dialect atlas of northern Yemen and adjacent areas*. In turn, this has led to the identification of shared phonological, morphological, and syntactical isoglosses between the epigraphic languages and the contemporary South Arabian dialects. Diem's "Studien zur Frage des Substrats im Arabischen" (1979), which also treats the Arabic varieties spoken in South Arabia is one of the first studies that primarily refers to morphological and syntactic, rather than only lexical parallels. Important recent studies that approach such phenomena from an areal perspective include Watson's "Southern Semitic and the Arabic dialects of the southwestern Arabian Peninsula" (2014) and "South Arabian and Yemeni Dialects" (2018).

To summarize: over the 20th and 21st century, the view of the linguistic situation of late pre-Islamic and early Islamic South Arabia has improved significantly. The linguistic evidence available comes very close to bridging the gap between the final stages of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. Between the epigraphic, documentary, and dialectological sources there is no dearth of information. Yet no attempt to systematically analyze this material has thus far been made, let alone discuss its broader social and historical implications. Seidensticker (1991:412) phrases this as follows in his review of al-Selwi's dissertation, by stating:

"Beim Studium einiger Lemmata muß man sich fragen, was denn nun aus den dargebotenen Daten folgt."

This observation can also be extended to the state of comparative linguistics in late antique South Arabia in general. In light of all the linguistic evidence, the following questions have remained unposed and unanswered: what was the nature of language contact in South Arabia during the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods? What is the relationship between the languages attested in the inscriptions, the Himyaritic language mentioned by the medieval scholars, and modern dialectological findings? And finally, what does language contact in late antique South Arabia tell us more about social change during the same period more broadly?

iv. Method

As mentioned in the introduction, the period between 550 to 850 AD is one for which very few primary sources exist. This dissertation seeks to address the lack of sources by applying the comparative method of historical linguistics. This method arose in the 19th century, when linguists became sought to systematically describe the relationship between certain European languages, such as English, French, and Latin and several languages spoken on or near the Indian Subcontinent, such as Sanskrit, Hindi, and Persian. By the late 19th century, the so-called Neogrammarians (*Junggrammatiker*) developed the theory of regular sound change, which would become one of the foundations of the comparative method (Campbell 2013:18–9). The historical-comparative method allowed scholars to divide language families into distinct branches, usually based on phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical features. In the case of the Semitic languages, such features, known as isoglosses, are discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

No language exists in isolation and contact between languages is often an important factor in driving linguistic change (Thomason and Kaufman 1988:35–37). When languages interact, certain linguistic features can be transmitted between them. The most ubiquitous of such features are loanwords, which are usually transferred between language for two reasons: necessity or prestige. Whereas the transfer of loanwords (‘borrowing’) is rather common and can occur in relatively low intensity contact situations, more intense situations of language contact can lead to other types of linguistic features transferring between languages (‘interference’ or ‘transfer’).

Which kind of linguistic elements are transferred between languages shows the intensity of contact. Although virtually all elements of a language can be borrowed, research shows that certain features are more easily transferred than others. Such features can then be mapped on a scale, ranking from less to more resistant to borrowing, referred to as a ‘borrowability’ hierarchy or scale.

Attempts to rank words based on their relative resistance to or ease of transfer go back to the late 19th century (Whitney 1881). In the latter half of the 20th century, quantitative methods allowed scholars to refine the borrowability scale, which had thus far mostly relied on data from two or three languages (Melissaropoulou and Ralli 2020:710). In 2007, Matras presented a new borrowability hierarchy of lexemes, based on a comparative analysis of 27 different languages. Matras’ borrowability hierarchy is presented as follows, ranked from most to least borrowable (Matras and Sakel 2007:61):

nouns, conjunctions > verbs > discourse markers > adjectives > interjections > adverbs other particles, adpositions > numerals > pronouns > derivational affixes > inflectional affixes

As Matras notes, many of the features mentioned here appear in other hierarchies as well. Generally, nouns tend to rank high on the borrowability scale whereas inflectional morphology ranks relatively low. Importantly, this hierarchy indicates

the likelihood with which certain features are borrowed and must not be seen as an absolute rule (Matras and Sakel 2007:62). Although some research has led to slight variations in the hierarchy, there is a general consensus that (for example) nouns, conjunctions, and verbs tend to transfer relatively easily, whereas inflectional morphology is rarely borrowed.

Furthermore, the social environment in which speakers of different languages interact with one another is a factor in contact-induced change. What is transmitted from one language to another can depend on social factors.

For example, Thomason and Kaufman (1988:37) describe borrowing as “incorporation of foreign features into a group’s native language: the native language is maintained but is changed by the addition of incorporated features”. Interference, on the other hand, “results from imperfect group learning during a process of language shift (...) a group of speakers shifting to a target language fails to learn the target language (TL) perfectly” (Thomason and Kaufman 1988:37–39). Thomason and Kaufman thus suggest that certain linguistic features transmit only in situations where one linguistic community is more socially dominant than the other.

This is not uncontroversial. Winford (2019:58) takes a critical stance toward this approach, noting that, according to Thomason and Kaufman’s theory, “interference” only occurs when a community shifts from one language to another. However, as Winford points out, “there is no one-to-one relationship between any mechanism of change and the type of language situation.” In other words, while the social context plays an important role with regards to the *intensity* of linguistic contact, it does not necessarily indicate that one linguistic community is more or less socially dominant than the other.

The terms used to refer to the social ‘ranking’ of a language in situations of contact are as follows: the language spoken by members of a group of a higher social standing is referred to a *superstrate*. The language spoken by group of smaller social capital is referred to as a *substrate*. When neither language is considered more or less prestigious than the other(s), they are known as an *adstrate* (Thomason 2011:75).^{8, 9}

As a rule, the further down the borrowability scale, the greater the likelihood of intense contact between languages. Although “intensity” is difficult to define precisely, Thomason (2011:66) roughly defines three indicators of intensity: 1) duration of linguistic contact, i.e., the longer the contact, the higher the likelihood of linguistic interference; 2) the size of the linguistic communities: if one of the communities involved is smaller than the other, the greater the likelihood they

⁸ The example of a superstrate that Thomason gives is that of Norman French in England, which was spoken by the dominant political elite and exerted a strong influence on English for several centuries (Thomason 2011:75)

⁹ Milroy notes that defining “social class” and “prestige” is potentially much more problematic than is often assumed. It may be assumed that a linguistic community may have a consensus about linguistic norms, but that is not necessarily the case (Milroy and Milroy 1992:3). However, as Hickey states: “asymmetrical levels of power in a contact situation play a definite role in the results of contact” (Hickey 2010:7–8)

will take over features from the larger linguistic community; and 3) if one of the linguistic communities is socio-economically dominant, the greater the chance the non-dominant community will take over linguistic features from the dominant group.

The importance of defining the social context in which the various languages of late antique South Arabia interacted with each other leads to the other methods used in this dissertation.

The first chapter of this dissertation primarily focuses on processes of socio-political change during this time by analyzing the sources. It looks specifically at the establishment and appropriation and breakdown of political legitimacy and authority. The analysis of the collapse of central state authority and the apparent subsequent decentralization that occurred in South Arabia during the 6th century broadly follows the approach defined by Schoon (2022:483–484). This describes the relationship between the object of legitimacy (the central state) and its audience (South Arabia’s tribal communities).

The final chapter incorporates early Islamic representations of pre-Islamic South Arabia and discusses how South Arabians came to be integrated into the early Islamic polity. As this chapter analyzes strategies of identification in the early Islamic world, it relies strongly on the methodological profile outlined by Pohl (2013). Importantly, it assumes that the ethnic community or communities that came to form during the early Islamic period were not static but were resulted from conscious and voluntary processes that included certain groups but excluded others.¹⁰

¹⁰ For examples of how certain groups were subsumed into the broad “Arab” ethnos, see Webb (2016:252)

Terminology and transcription

For the transcription of texts in the Epigraphic South Arabian languages, I apply the same method as the one found in DASI (*Digital Archive for the Study of pre-Islamic inscriptions*). In these texts parentheses () indicate that one or more characters are partially or fully illegible, whereas brackets [] indicate a restored reading in case of lacunae. With regards to the transcription of the South Arabian sibilants, the ‘neutral’ system of s¹, s², and s³ is used, rather than the ‘traditional’ transcription š, s and ś.

With regards to the transcription of Classical Arabic, I maintain the system of the *Deutsche Institut für Normierung* (DIH 31635). This method of transcription has the advantage that every Arabic phoneme corresponds to a single glyph rather than to a digraph. For example, the Arabic letter ġ (*ġayn/ghayn*) is always represented by ġ, not <gh>. A notable divergence from DIH’s transcription concerns that of the glottal stop [ʔ] and the voiced pharyngeal fricative [ʕ]. The author has chosen to represent these as ʔ and ʕ, as he subjectively considers them to be more legible, especially in the reading of unvocalized texts.

The same system of transcription is maintained for the other Semitic languages. Furthermore, many Semitic languages are characterized by the presence of so-called “emphatic consonants.” The realization of these consonants differs from language to language, and occasionally, language-internally.¹¹ The emphatic counterparts of consonants are represented with a dot, for example *t* and *ṭ*.

In-text citations of Arabic terminology is given without the case and mood endings (*ʔiʕrāb*), whereas full citations, usually in the footnotes, are transcribed with full case and mood endings. Arabic names that are well-known and have been fully integrated in English will conform to their corresponding forms in English in the main text, e.g., *Muhammad* instead of *Muḥammad*; *Cairo* instead of *al-Qāhira*.

As a rule, translations of the South Arabian inscriptions follows those by DASI/CSAI, unless explicitly noted otherwise. All other translations were done by the author.

¹¹ See the discussion about the emphatic consonants below (2.1.).

Glossing abbreviations

ABS	absolute state
ACC	accusative
ACT	active voice
ADV	adverb
CONJ	conjunction
CST	construct state
DEF	definite
DET	determinate state
DL	dual
F	feminine
GEN	genitive
HON	honorific
IMP	imperative
IMPF	imperfect
INDET	indeterminate
IND	indicative
INF	infinitive
M	masculine
NEG	negation
NOM	nominative
PASS	passive voice
PL	plural
PAST	past tense
PREP	preposition
PRET	preterit
PRO	pronoun
REL	relative
SG	singular

CHAPTER 1: Political transformations

By the middle of the 6th century AD, South Arabia had undergone a series of rapid and drastic political changes. Until the start of the century, the area stretching roughly from Nağrān in the north to Ḥaḍramawt in the east had been under the control of the Ḥimyarite kingdom (Gajda 2009:37–38). The Ḥimyarites, representing a confederacy of tribes originating in the highlands of southwest Yemen, had been neither the first nor the only state in South Arabia. In fact, the Ḥimyarites had only arisen towards the end of the 2nd century BC and would, in the centuries following, come to gradually overcome and integrate the different South Arabian states that had existed before them .

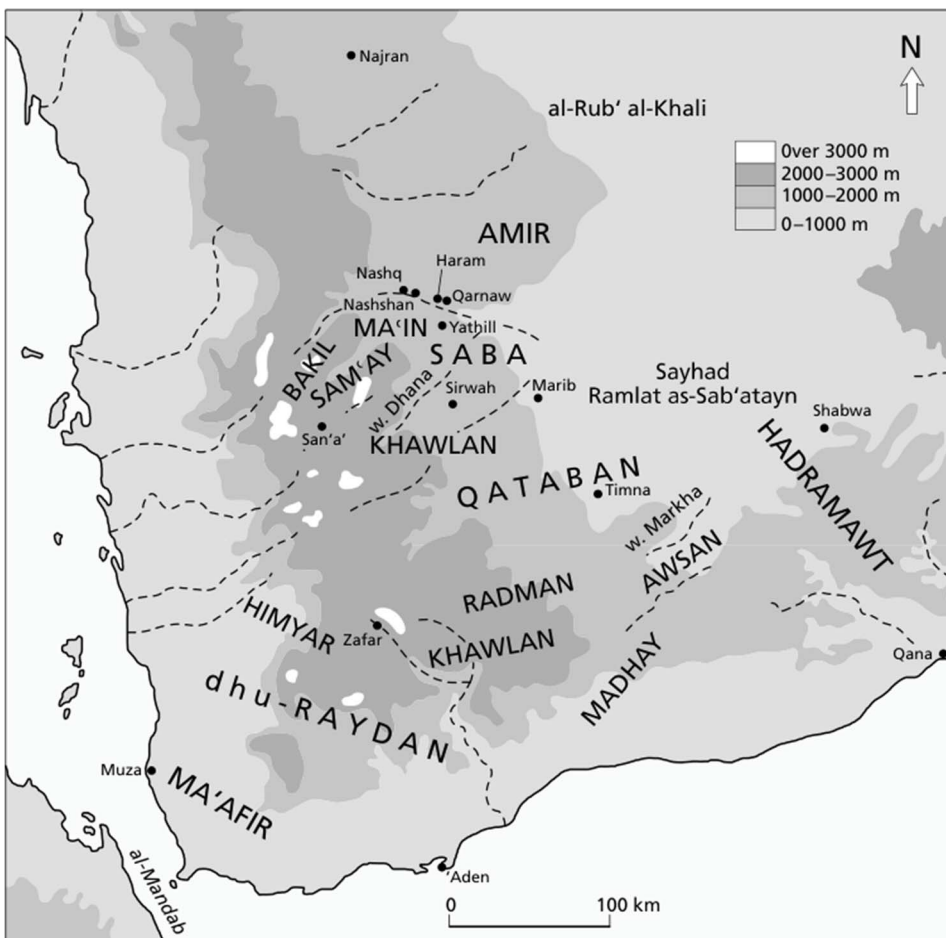


Figure 1: Map of South Arabia around the 2nd century BC, showing the region's major political factions (adapted from Hoyland (2001:37))

South Arabia was characterized by a system of social divisions that directly influenced political organization in the region. The main social groups in South Arabia were divided between sedentary inhabitants of the region's highlands and lowlands. Starting from the 2nd century BC onwards, various semi-nomadic tribal groups that had inhabited the border area between southern and central Arabia came to increasingly exert cultural and political influences in the south (Agostini 2018:356–57).

Furthermore, the region that Ḥimyarites conquered was part of a strongly interconnected world.¹² Particularly from the 1st century BC onwards, South Arabian economic and cultural connections with the eastern Mediterranean,¹³ the Persian Gulf,¹⁴ and India¹⁵ intensified. Not only did South Arabia come to function as an important hub for the Indian Ocean trade, but South Arabian aromatics, particularly myrrh and frankincense, were in wide demand for a variety of purposes (Seland 2014:376).

This interconnectedness of the late antique world would facilitate the spread of monotheist communities to South Arabia. By the late 3rd century, South Arabian polytheism had been on the decline. A century later, the Ḥimyarite elite had come to adopt a broad kind of monotheism which initially lacked any overt Jewish or Christian characteristics (Gajda 2002:616–618). However, from the late 5th century onwards, the Ḥimyarites had begun to pivot more explicitly towards Judaism (Gajda 2009:68).

¹² The first evidence of contact between South Arabia and the Levant and Mesopotamia goes back to at least the 8th century BC, with cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia referring to South Arabian trade caravans. Furthermore, specific references to Sabaean rulers are found in inscriptions dating to the reigns of Sargon II (722 – 705 BC) and Sennacherib (705 – 681 BC) (Potts 2010:40). Minaean inscriptions from Dadan furthermore refer to mercantile communities in Taymā², Gaza, and Egypt (Rossi 2014:113).

¹³ The clearest example of Mediterranean and Levantine influence in South Arabia is the introduction of Judaism and Christianity starting from the 2nd century AD onwards. This will be treated in more detail below (page xx). Further examples of Hellenistic influence include the two statues of the Ḥimyarite rulers Ḍamar⁶alī Yuhabirr and his son Ta²rān, which Stupperich and Yule described as among “the best large Greco-Roman statues available” (Stupperich and Yule 2014).

¹⁴ Some Hasaitic (a North Arabian language) inscriptions but written in the cursive South Arabian script have been found at the site of Mleiha (near Sharjah, UAE), suggesting that the South Arabian script was adopted in the Gulf around 300 BC (Stein 2017:120, 2019:135). There is comparatively less evidence for direct trade between the Gulf and South Arabia than with India and the eastern Mediterranean, respectively, although a coin hoard originating in East Arabia has been discovered in South Arabia (Potts 2009:42).

¹⁵ Indian pottery found at the Ḥaḍramite site of Sumhurām (*S¹mhrm*) indicates the existence of trade relations between South Arabia and southern India from the 3rd and 2nd century BC onwards (Pavan 2015:124). Furthermore, graffiti in Brahmi and Kharosti script found at cave Hoq on Socotra is evidence of an Indian traders in South Arabia (Strauch 2012).

At the beginning of the 6th century, Aksumite Ethiopia increasingly threatened Ḥimyarite hegemony over South Arabia.¹⁶ Although the exact circumstances of Aksumites interference in South Arabia are unclear, it seems that Aksum attempted to extend its influence over the region. Initially, this was done through diplomatic pressure. Later, the Aksumites intervened directly by invading South Arabia (Hatke 2011). The likely presence of a pro-Aksumite ruler on the Ḥimyarite throne led to a local rebellion in or around 522 AD, which was followed by a second invasion and the re-establishment of Aksumite rule in South Arabia (Nebes 2008).

Both the Ḥimyarites and the Aksumites relied on the same means of establishing political legitimacy in South Arabia. From the first century AD onwards, the Ḥimyarites laid claim to the Sabaeen royal title of “king of Saba’ and Ǫū Raydān” (*mlk s’b’ w-d-rydn*), which was simultaneously used by the Sabaeen kings until the Ḥimyarites finally conquered the Sabaeans in the 3rd century AD (Gajda 2009:189). Similarly, after the Aksumite general ruler Abraha sought to establish an independent political dynasty in South Arabia several centuries later, he too claimed the Sabaeen-Ḥimyarite royal titulature (Robin and Tayran 2012:534).

1.1. Social organization

1.1.1. Social organization: tribal organization

The term “tribe” is often haphazardly applied in reference to social organization outside Europe with little specificity and often, particularly in older literature, can carry a certain value judgment.¹⁷ Occasionally, the term ‘tribe’ is used without an explanation of how this term is understood.¹⁸ In South Arabia specifically, tribes were connected one the one hand through a shared notion of descent, further solidified by tribal territorial possessions (Adra 2021:22–23) Tribal groups in South Arabia did not exist in opposition to the state, but formed the basis of state formation (Tapper 1990:51–52).

Most of the tribes in pre-Islamic South Arabia were sedentary. This was the direct result of the region’s natural geography (Korotayev 2020:162). In contrast

¹⁶ The Ḥimyarites’ pivot towards Judaism has often been juxtaposed to the Aksumites’ conversion to Christianity under the reign of Ezānā, c. 350 AD. However, the Aksumites had already had a military presence in South Arabia during the 3rd century AD and their attempts to re-establish themselves in South Arabia can plausibly be seen as an irredentist political campaign (Hatke 2011:110)

¹⁷ As Tapper points out, “tribes” are often juxtaposed with states and “tribes” are often associated with nomadism and pastoralism, although not all communities identified as tribes are necessarily nomadic or pastoralist. As we shall see, this was not the case in South Arabia, specifically (Tapper 1990). Robin notes that the usage of the term *tribu* can give the incorrect impression that South Arabia’s inhabitants were majority nomadic (Robin 2006:45).

¹⁸ For example, in his study of Yemen in early Islam, Al-Medej does not explain how he understands the term ‘tribe, although he uses the term frequently (Al-Medej 1983:4–5).

with most of the Arabian Peninsula, the mountainous landscapes of modern Yemen and southwestern Saudi-Arabia allowed for the development of both small and large-scale agriculture. The Sarawat mountain range, which reaches its highest peaks in Southwest Arabia forms a natural barrier that traps monsoon rains in the region. Therefore, the eastern slopes of the South Arabian highlands receive a relatively large amount of yearly precipitation.¹⁹ The more arid lowland regions of the east receive comparatively less rain but are subjected to regular flash floods (*suyūl*) (Dresch 2001:9).

Both regions saw the development of systems of water management and agriculture from around the 4th millennium BC onwards. Archaeological evidence indicate the presence of smaller dams and water diversion systems in the river valleys from around the same time onwards (Harrower 2009:61–63). These systems became more refined and efficient over time, which in turn allowed for the sustenance of a sedentary population and the beginnings of state formation (Mouton 2013:125).²⁰

South Arabia’s sedentary population is further divided into two distinct groups. The first inhabit the South Arabian lowlands, in particular the regions around the edges of the Sayhad desert; the latter the eastern slopes of the Sarawāt mountain range (Gajda 2009:176–178; Matsumoto 2003). In the South Arabian epigraphic texts, these various sedentary groups are referred to with the term *šʿb* (*s^{2b}*) (Robin 2020b:206–7) (Robin 2004:852–53). The term *šaʿb* has been subject to various interpretations, summarized by Korotayev as follows:

“[the n]otion of *shaʿb* is translated by different scholars in different ways [...] “tribe”, ‘community’, ‘people’, ‘district; province’. There are grounds for maintaining that all of these variants (except the last one) are correct in some way.”

Korotayev distinguishes three orders of *šaʿb*: the first order consisted of the community in its broadest sense; they were broad tribal groups bound together by adherence to a shared single deity or ancestral figure, or any kind of common cultural feature. However, these large tribal groupings did not necessarily consist of nor preclude a single political unit. In comparison to the first order of *šaʿb*, the second order of *šaʿbs* consisted of a much stronger and centralized political unit (Korotayev 1996: 18). The *šaʿb*, however, was not by definition an unchanging social unit. As Robin has shown, a *šaʿb* could undergo processes of absorption or secession, or – in some cases – disappear completely (Robin 1982:74). Most importantly, and in contrast to the rest of the Arabian Peninsula at the time, is that

¹⁹ The amount of rainfall in the highlands depends on the region. The area around Ibb tends to have the highest amount of rainfall at about 1000 millimeters per year, and the area around Ṣaʿdah the lowest, around 200 millimeters (Dresch 2001:9)

²⁰ The earliest evidence of two important types of water management (terrace farming and water diversion systems) date to the 4th millennium BC, becoming more refined over the following millennia. In the highlands, terrace farming, which generally sustains a relatively smaller population was more common than water diversion, which was practiced primarily in the South Arabian lowlands (Mouton 2004:85)

the South Arabian *šaʿb* was organized on the basis of property. This property often included a specific territory or building located thereon (Gajda 2009:181).

The smallest sociopolitical unit in pre-Islamic South Arabia was the *bayt* (byt). This term has been translated as “lineage” or “house.”²¹ Robin (1982:74) originally suggest that tribal allegiance was tied to the ownership of a physical house. However, the South Arabian *bayt* probably simply reflected the smallest social community, which could be tied to a specific structure, which could be a house, tower, palace or any other larger building (Korotayev 1996:22; Robin 2006:45).²²

Following the integration of South Arabia into the Islamic polity, the terminology referring to South Arabia’s tribal groups changed. Although the tribes themselves remained sedentary, the term *šaʿb* fell out of use and was replaced with the term *qabīla*. This difference in terminology arose as a result of South Arabia’s tribal communities’ integration within a broader pan-Arab ethnos (Mahoney 2016).

1.1.2. Social organization: state formation

The development of water diversion systems and the resulting increase in agricultural production in South Arabia are likely to have led to the beginning of state formation in the region. The South Arabian highlands with their higher amounts of annual rainfall allowed for terrace farming and small-scale irrigation manageable by relatively small communities. On the other hand, the South Arabian lowlands, which were subject to flash flooding, required a greater degree of social cooperation and organization (Korotayev 2020:163).

The beginning of state formation and the development of long-distance trade between South and North Arabia is likely not coincidental.²³ It is argued that the cultivation and export of incense which, apart from the Horn of Africa, only grows in the arid regions of South Arabia’s eastern lowlands contributed to the development of state formation in South Arabia. It is plausible that the two processes created a positive feedback loop, whereby state formation facilitated long-distance

²¹ Various other translations have also been offered: Beeston (1983) translates *bayt* as “village or clan community” and Robin prefers *lignage*, “lineage”. Korotayev, argues against both translations, noting that Beeston’s translation as “village community” gives the erroneous impression of a highly urbanized society in pre-Islamic South Arabia and creates the false opposition between *bayt* and *hagar*, “town”. Korotayev shows that the *bayt* could exist both within and without the walls of a *hagar*. Similarly, Korotayev would amend Robin’s translation *lineage* to more specifically include various families descended from a common ancestor, rather than just the male line.

²² Robin acknowledges in the footnote that he “n’ai relevé pas moute que pour les lignages de *qayls* (voir RES 3990, 8–9, etc.)” but did not expand on the possible implications of the term *ʿbʿl*, “owners” being restricted to *qaylite* clans. (Robin 1982:138, f. 205)

²³ Korotayev (2020:162) states that it is “well-known” that long-distance trade could be an important factor in state formation; contra Singer (2007:6), who argues that “it was only when the South Arabians had the economic and social structures in place to provide a secure system of maintained roads [...] that they turned to commerce as a means of further enrichment”.

trade, whose economic benefits, in turn, early state structures (Korotayev 2020:162; Singer 2007:6).

The first South Arabian states emerged around 1000 BC in the region's lowlands, along the western and northwestern edges of the Ṣayhad desert, also known as the *Ramlat al-Sabʿatayn*. Epigraphic and archaeological evidence indicates that the settlements around Marib and the Wādī al-Ġawf were among the first to rise to prominence (Arbach and Rossi 2020:19–20).

By the 8th century BC, more states had formed along the Sayhad desert. The emergence of these correlates with the introduction and political application of the South Arabian script, although the exact relation between the two remains controversial. One hypothesis posits that this script was introduced to the region by the Sabaeans, a distinct socio-ethnic group who migrated from the Levant to South Arabia around 1100 BC and introduced both writing and a new system of political governance (Nebes 2001:430).

Archaeological evidence complicates this theory. Sherds with South Arabian glyphs, both incised and painted, have been found at Yalā (southwest of the Sabaean capital at Marib) as well as further east in Raybūn, Hadramawt. Radiocarbon dating shows that the earliest of these sherds were crafted between 1450 and 1150 BC (Sass 2005:96–112). Furthermore, miniscule inscriptions on palm leaf sticks originating from the Wādī al-Ġawf indicate that this technique was in contemporaneous use both in the Sabaean heartland as well as further north (Stein, Jocham, and Marx 2016:264). This suggests that the South Arabian script came to be adopted in different parts of the region simultaneously, rather than there having been a single center of diffusion from which it spread across the region.

Nevertheless, the Sabaean state, with its capital at Marib (Sab. *Mr(y)b*),²⁴ grew to be both the most politically successful and culturally dominant in the region. Apart from the apparent linguistic influence of Sabaic occasionally attested in the non-Sabaic languages in the regions, the other South Arabian states adopted the Sabaean style of writing monumental inscriptions, stonecutting techniques and the erection of (Breton 1999:49–51).

Sabaeen political and cultural influence also impacted East Africa. Evidence for the development of urban settlement in what is now northeastern Ethiopia and Eritrea goes back to the early first millennium BC (Benoist et al. 2020:19–20). From the 8th century BC onwards, a distinct state referred to as Daʿmat (Eth-Sab. *Dʿmt*) developed besides these settlements, representing a confluence of early Sabaeen and distinct pre-Aksumite Ethiopian culture (Dugast and Gajda 2012). The most salient evidence of South Arabian influence in East Africa is the introduction of the South Arabian script, which would later be modified into the Ethiopic script (Benoist et al. 2021; Fattovich 1977:73–77).

²⁴ The form *Mryb* is attested predominantly in the Early to Middle Sabaic periods, whereas *Mrb* is attested from the Middle Sabaic to Late Sabaic periods. It is usually assumed that the change in spelling reflects a change in pronunciation (e.g., **Maryab* > *Marīb* [?]) although this remains speculative.

1.2. Political organization

1.2.1. Sabaeen political organization

Around the 9th century BC, the Sabaeans became the political hegemony over large parts of South Arabia. For the next few centuries, the Sabaeans were politically dominant in the area, during which period the ruler of the Sabaeen state held the title of *mukarrib* (Sab. *mkrb*). The meaning of the term *mukarrib* and the extent of his power used to be a more controversial subject,²⁵ although it is now believed that it likely meant “unifier” and that it carried an implicit claim over the entirety of the South Arabian cultural area (Mouton 2013:134–36; Potts 2003).

From the 7th century BC onwards, political circumstances in South Arabia began to change, with the development of several rival states in the region. To the Sabaeans’ north, a confederation of city states under the leadership of Ma’in (*M’in*) was able to assert their independence and would become a significant economic power up until the 3rd century BC (Schiettecatte and Arbach 2020:252–58). In the east, the ruler of Qatabān (*Qṭbn*) also laid claim to the title *mukarrib*, and later Qatabanian rulers were eventually able to extend their power to the Red Sea shore (Strabo 1930:716 Prioletta 2013:111). Further east still, the kingdom of Ḥaḍramūt (*Hḍrm(w)t*), was also able to establish themselves as an independent political power, although the relative dearth of Hadramitic inscriptions hampers a clear reconstruction of their history (Prioletta 2013a).

Whether the Sabaeans’ decline was the cause, or the result of these states’ rise to power is difficult to say. However, the historical evidence shows that the Sabaeen rulers were no longer able to effectively assert authority over the entire region. The epigraphic record shows that from the 6th century BC, political influence shifted towards the *ša’bs* residing in the South Arabian highlands. The representatives of these communities appear in the Sabaic inscriptions under the term *qayl* (E.Sab. *qwl*; M./L.Sab. *qyl*; pl. [?]*qyl*; *qyl*), which can be rendered as “chief” or “prince” (Gajda 2009:208–9).

The power of the *qayl* was hereditary and invested into a single clan, (the *byt*, discussed above, 1.1.1.). The relationship between the Sabaeen king and the *qayls* appears to have been one of mutual benefit: the *qayl* was able to exercise singular political authority in the area their clan inhabited; in return, the *qayls* legitimized the Sabaeen king from among their own ranks through election (Korotayev 1993: 54–56; 1996:47–49; Robin 2002:51).

The increased influence of the *qayls* had a direct impact on the Sabaeen political sphere. For example, by the 1st century AD, the title *mukarrib* had disappeared from the inscriptions. This was likely the result of the deterioration of the central Sabaeen state. While no Sabaeen ruler was able to successfully assert the title of *mukarrib*, it continued to be in use for a much longer period in Qataban.²⁶

²⁵ An earlier hypothesis held that the *mukarrib* was a kind of priest-king, with the implication of a divine right to rule (Beeston 2005c:175–78).

²⁶ One of the last attestations of the term *mkrb* in a Qatabanic inscription (BE 9/CSAI I, 43) dates to the 1st century BC to 2nd AD.

1.2.2. Ḥimyarite political organization

The Ḥimyarite confederacy originated in what is now southwest Yemen, in the western hinterlands of the Qatabanian kingdom. Around the 2nd century BC, the state of Qatabān entered a period of decline which would be punctuated by the kingdom's disintegration several decades later.²⁷ The weakening of Qatabān allowed several of its tribal communities to assert political independence. Such communities included ʿAwsān, which had previously existed as an independent kingdom, as well as the tribal confederacies of Radmān, Maḍhī, and Ḥimyar (Priolletta 2013:127). These tribal confederacies showed their claim to independence by implementing a new calendar, with the Ḥimyarite year count beginning in the year 110 BC (Robin 2012b).

Over the centuries following, the Ḥimyarites were able to gradually overcome and integrate the various polities that had existed in South Arabia. By the middle of the 1st century AD, the Ḥimyarites established a sort of political union with the Sabaeans and were likely the dominant power in this union. (Gajda 2009:193). At this time, the Ḥimyarite rulers first laid claim to the Sabaean royal titulature and began to style themselves as “king[s] of Sabaʿ and Dū Raydān” (*mlk sʿbʿ w-d-rydn*). The Ḥimyarites further sought to portray themselves as the Sabaeans' successors by continuing the veneration of the Sabaean state god ʿĪlmūquh²⁸ at the temple of Awwām (Robin 2003:102–3).

The Ḥimyarites were able to centralize the state more effectively for two important reasons. Beginning with the reign of Ṭaʿrān Yuhanʿim in the late 4th century, the Ḥimyarites implemented a system of coregency. Coregencies had existed in South Arabia before, but (with the exception of the Minaeans) had been generally unusual (Gajda 2009:185–86). Ṭaʿrān Yuhanʿim changed this system by creating a system of governance in which the members of the Ḥimyarite royal family were placed directly in control of the state's regions (Robin 2014:10). This gave the Ḥimyarite state a degree of stability and political continuity that had not existed in the other South Arabian states.

By the beginning of the 5th century, the co-regent system became the norm in the Ḥimyarite kingdom. This system allowed for continuous political administration, which was particularly useful when one of the rulers was conducting a military campaign. The epigraphic evidence indicates that co-regents were not equal, although it is not clear how this hierarchy was set up (Gajda 2009:185–88).

²⁷ The state of Qatabān came to an end between 100 and 160 AD. Archaeological evidence indicates that during the 2nd century AD, the Qatabanian capital at Timnaʿ was burned. Afterwards, the remnants of the Qatabanian state moved to the south, (re)occupying the site of Ḥajar bin Ḥumayd (Breton 1999:171).

²⁸ The vocalization of the deity's name, spelled ʿlmqh(w), is unknown and varies from author to author. The vocalization used here assumes that the name consists of the noun *ʿl, ‘God’ plus an (unattested) participle of the root wqh, ‘to command’, i.e., *mūquh (cf. Classical Arabic *mūḡib*, ‘obligating’ < *waḡaba*, ‘to be necessary’). The German scholar Daum (2023:4) suggested a reading ʿĪl-muqaḥhū, “the God who abundantly waters”, based on the root qhw, “to drink”, used in some dialects of Yemeni Arabic.

A second way by which the Himyarites increased the efficacy of their system of government was by naming administrative officials in areas not directly under their control:

1. The term *kabīr* (*kbr*, pl. *kbwr*) is used almost exclusively in conjunction with larger tribal groups, which seems to suggest they were representatives of large tribes, who enjoyed royal support.²⁹
2. The term *ʿāqib* (*ʿqb*; pl. *ʿqbt/mʿqbt*) refers to individuals in charge of a territory not directly administered by the kings. This is largely a continuation from the Sabaean period, where the same system already existed. Under the Sabaean, the city of Naṣq was administered by an *ʿāqib*, likely reflecting the special status the settlement had (Korotayev 1993:96)

Thirdly, the Himyarites' success at centralizing the state is also shown by the diminishing role of the *maqṭawī*. The *maqṭawī* had been a type of political office with significant power during the Middle Sabaean period (Korotayev 1996:57–59). The *maqṭawī*'s relevance began to wane after the Himyarites' ascent to power, as references to the *maqṭawī* rarely occur in the epigraphic material from the 4th century onwards. When they do occur, they are only mentioned as royal dignitaries or individuals attached to a *qayl* or a specific *ṣaʿb* (Gajda 2009:214).

Lastly, the Himyarites' adoption of monotheism, to be treated in more detail in the following section, may have also served to ensure lasting political stability after the integration of the various South Arabian states. Gajda suggests that the Himyarites' unification of South Arabia at the end of the 3rd century AD left them in control over a vast region, prone to both internal collapse and external pressure. Therefore, the adoption of monotheism could have been a way to further stabilize the state (Gajda 2009:223–24).³⁰

1.3. Religious organization

By the beginning of the 6th century AD, much of the Himyarite elite had converted to Judaism (Robin 2015b:164–5), which is often explained in the context of political conflict with Aksumite Ethiopia. As is well-known, the Ethiopian ruler ʿĒzānā converted to Christianity sometime during the middle of the 4th century AD, and the Himyarites' move towards Judaism is seen as their way to distinguish themselves from the Aksumites (Hatke 2011:87–88). This shift was the end of

²⁹ The term *kabīr* is attested in the pre-Himyaritic period as well. An inscription from the Ḥaḍramitic period (Ja 954) mentions “Šahrum bin Wāʿilum, *kabīr* of the *ʿamhūr*” (*sʿhrm bn wʿlm kbr ʿmhrn*). The term *ʿamhūr* is an apparent plural of *mahrat*, referring to the large tribal group of eastern Yemen and western Oman.

³⁰ Sabaʿ was conquered by the Himyarites around 280 AD, and although strictly speaking the kingdom of Ḥaḍramawt was fully annexed after the campaigns of ʿAṣʿad bin ʿAḥṣan (r. c. 324 – 375 AD), it had functionally ceased to be a threat to Himyarite hegemony after Šammar Yuharʿiš burned the Ḥaḍramite capital at Šabwa.

result of a gradual process that had begun with the introduction of monotheism to South Arabia in the second century AD and a shift towards a general, broad monotheism in the 4th century with neither explicitly Christian nor Jewish features (Robin 2003:105–10).

The following section explores the development of monotheism in South Arabia from its earliest stages onwards, until to the Ḥimyarites' conversion to Judaism, the subsequent conflict with Aksumite Ethiopia and the temporary establishment of Christianity as South Arabia's state religion. It also discusses South Arabia's religious environment on the cusp of the coming of Islam and its potential influences on Islam's early development.

1.3.1. South Arabian henotheism

Before the Ḥimyarites' acceptance of monotheism, South Arabian society had been polytheist. The veneration of deities, which ranged from the personal-familial up to the level of the state played an important role in establishing and maintaining social cohesion. The various South Arabian kingdoms had their own national deities, whereas individual households and families maintained the veneration of protective spirits (Robin 1991a:139–144).

The term henotheism refers to a situation wherein a single deity is elevated over others, who derive their powers from this single deity (Holsten 1986; Mazurek 2022:72) Some evidence of this phenomenon in South Arabia between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD. From the first century BC onwards, the northern-most part of the South Arabian cultural area came to be increasingly settled by various central Arabian tribes, particularly the Amirites. These tribes built temples to the deities *Ḍū Samāwī* and *Ḥalfān*, and both deities were syncretized with the pan-South-Arabian deity *ʿAṭṭar*, who was venerated in this region under the name *ʿAṭṭar Ṣariqān* (*ʿṭṭr sʿrqn*) (Robin 1992b:46–49)

The establishment of Amirite mercantile communities in South Arabian cities likely brought the cult of *Ḍū Samāwī* further south (Robin 2003:103). References to the worship of *Ḍū Samāwī* appear in various South Arabian inscriptions, including several dozen Sabaic inscriptions and at least one Qatabanic inscription, where he is predominantly identified as the “God of ʿAmir” (*ʿlh ʿmrm*).³¹ Furthermore, a Sabaic inscription from al-Sawā was dedicated by the governor of Maʿāfir to the *Ḍū Samāwī*, appearing again as “God of Amir” (*ʿlh ʿmrm*).³² This inscription contains enough relevant social and political information to quote in its entirety:

³¹ For example, CIH 521 (CSAI): [*Sʿʿ*](*dʿ*)*wm d*–[... ..] [*h*]*qny d-Sʿmwy* (ʿ)[*lh ʿmrm*] [*ʿ*]*bln d-dhbn*, “Sʿdʿwm of [... ..] dedicated to *Ḍū Samāwī*, God of the Amirites, this bronze camel”.

³² The author of the inscription, Kulayb Yuhanʿim (*klyb yhnʿm*) is almost certainly to be identified with the Kholaibos mentioned in the 1st century Greek work “the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea”: “a three-day journey inland from Muza lies Saue, the city of the province called Mapharites that surrounds it. The governor, Cholaibos, has his residence there” (Casson 1989:63; Robin 1994:93).

Sharʿabī as-Sawā 1:1–5 (translation CSAI):

“Kulayb Yuhaʿmun bin Yišmar Yuhāḥmud of Maʿāfirum and Ḍabʿum and (...?) of the family Kalʿān and ʿAʿsyafur and ḏū-Ḥablum had made and built the temple of the God Ḍū-Samāwī, God of the ʿAmīrum, which is on the plain Ṣayratān, below the city of Sawwām. May Ḍū Samāwī, God of ʿAmīrum, grant safety, security, and protection to Kulayb Yuhaʿmun and to his sons of the family Muʿāfirum, lords of the palace Šaʿbān, and the safety of everything they own”³³

It is notable that in this inscription, authored by a high-ranking aristocratic representative who himself was not a member of the ʿAmirite tribe, no other deities are mentioned. This suggests that the first century AD, a movement towards the veneration of a single deity, in this case, that of Ḍū Samāwī had already taken place. The deity’s overt association with the sky may have facilitated this process, as celestial deities tend to shift towards taking a central role within pantheons (Marrassini 1978).³⁴

From the 1st century AD onwards, participation in polytheistic rituals ceased to fulfill its primary role of establishing allegiance to the state. From this time onwards, political allegiance was completely determined by one’s adherence to the local *qayl* (Robin 1996:1189)³⁵ The cessation of the political role of polytheism would also have facilitated a gradual pivot towards henotheism and later, explicit monotheism.

Thus, during the 3rd century AD, two important phenomena co-occurred: firstly, references to other deities begin to dwindle at Sabaeen state temple of ʿAwwām (Robin 2003). Secondly, the Sabaeen state God ʿĪlmūquh (*ʿlmqh*) begins to receive the epithet “Lord” (*mrʿ*). Both of these phenomena suggest a move towards elevating a single deity, in the case of the Sabaeans the god ʿĪlmūquh, as worthy of veneration. That this may have also been the case for other South Arabian communities is exemplified by a 3rd century personal letter, wherein Ḍū-Samāwī, who was worshipped by the ʿAmīrites, is referred to as “the God” (*ʿln*) (Stein 2009b: 346).

1.3.2. The spread of monotheism

Epigraphic, archaeological, and documentary sources indicate that Jewish and Christian communities had been present in South Arabia from at least the 3rd century AD onwards.

³³ Sharʿabi as-Sawā 1 (CSAI): [Kly](b Yhʿ)m(n) [b](n) (Ysʿm) Yhḥmd ḏ-Mʿfrm w-Ḍbʿm w ʿr(yn) (w)- [.]n bn Klʿn w-ʿsʿyfr w-ḏ-Ḥblm ḥfʿl w-hqsʿb mḥrm ʿlhn [ḏ-Sʿmwy]y ʿlh ʿmrm ḏ-b-brḥtn Ṣyrtm ḏ-tḥt hgrn Sʿwm w-ʿlhn ḏ-[Sʿmwy] (ʿ)lh ʿmrm (f-l-ly)sʿmn wfy w-sʿrh w-sʿwft Klyb Yhʿmn [w-bn]y-hw ḏ-(M)[ʿfrm ʿ]bʿl bytn Sʿbʿn w-[w](f)y kl ḏ-qn(y)[w]

³⁴ Many such comparative examples exist: the cult of Isis-Sarapis, for example, gave an universalizing aspect to the figure of Isis, whereas the most important deity in Turkic traditional relation is the sky god Tengri (Mazurek 2022:72–74; Soudavar 2006:414).

³⁵ See also above, 1.2.1. and 1.2.2.

The history of South Arabia’s Jewish community is relatively well-described. Robin’s monography (2015b) provides a thorough overview of the wide range of material available with regards to the history of Judaism on the Arabian Peninsula, based on pre-Islamic epigraphic, archaeological and documentary sources in a variety of languages, as well the Quran and medieval Arabic sources.

A similar systematic analysis of South Arabia’s Christian communities is still lacking. Shahid (1995) gives a chronological overview of the relationship between the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire with the Arabian Peninsula, but, as the title implies, particularly from a Roman perspective. Gajda (Gajda 2009:248–51) discusses the available material, epigraphic, archaeological, and documentary, which admittedly, is not as extensive as the evidence pertaining to the Jewish community.

1.3.2.1. Judaism

The establishment of the Jewish community in South Arabia is usually traced back to the end of the 1st century AD, following the Siege of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Second Temple and the subsequent migration of many members of the Jewish community throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Robin 2015b:16–17). It is likely that more Jews may have settled in South Arabia following the Bar Kokhba revolt in 136 AD (Bar 2005:49–50).

The nature of the Jewish community in South Arabia appears to have differed from those in the eastern Mediterranean in several ways. These differences range from issues related to the leadership of the community and places of worship. For example, the only reference to a communal leader is that of a *ḥazzān* (Sab. *ḥzn*), ‘officer’, who appears to have been in charge of the Jewish community in Ḥaṣī, in what is now southern Yemen (Robin 2015b:101).

Similarly, the most common term to refer to shared houses of worship in South Arabia is *mikrāb* (Sab. *mkrb*, cf. Gəʿəz *məkʷrab*) (Robin 2015b:123–25). The term *kneset* (Sab. *knsʿt*) appears in a singular South Arabian inscription, where it is mentioned as a part of a *mikrāb* (Robin 2015b:127). An early inscription, likely pre-dating the 3rd century AD mentions the term *masgid*, the presence of spirantization (*d > ḡ*) indicating that this term was likely directly loaned from Aramaic (Robin 2015b:289) (translation author):

MS Tanʿim al-Qarya 9:

*wtnm ʾmn ʾmn w-ḡn bytn msʾḡḡn*³⁶

“[...] Amen, amen; this is the house of worship”.

Later inscriptions offer more tangible evidence for the establishment of a Jewish community in South Arabia. For example, the Judaic personal name Yahūdā

³⁶ The phrase *bytn msʾḡḡn* is normally translated as in construct “house of worship”. Grammatically, one would expect the term *byt* to stand in the construct state. In this context, the term *msʾḡḡn* appears to be more like an adjective, although this seems semantically difficult to justify.

(Sab. *Yhwd*[?]) is attested in a construction inscription dating to the late 4th or early 5th century (Robin 2015b:188–89).

Sources from outside South Arabia seem to confirm the existence of a Jewish community in the region. Several funerary inscriptions, at least two of which were written in Israel, commemorate the burial of Jews that had either visited or resided in South Arabia. The first of these, an Aramaic inscription dating to the end of the 5th century, refers to a Yoseh bar [?]Awfā (*Ywsh br [?]wfy*), who “passed away in the city of Ṭafar, in the land of the Himyarites” (*d-gz b-Ṭfr mdynth b-[?]r[?]hwn d-Hmyry[?]y*) (Robin 2015b:192–93). Unfortunately, the text does not state the reason nor the length of the deceased’s presence in South Arabia. The fact his remains were returned to Israel indicates that the Jewish community was able to successfully fulfill the necessary logistical requirements. Considering the distance between Judaea and South Arabia, this would have been a significant feat.

Several of the Himyaritic elements discovered at the Beit She’arim necropolis have undergone critical scrutiny by Robin, who argues that there is no evidence to suggest the presence of Himyarite monograms and/or texts referring to a Himyarite *qayl* in the tombs. Less controversial is the presence of a Greek epitaph written in red paint above the entrance to one of the sepulchers at Beit She’arim in Israel reads *Ōmēritōn*, “of the Himyarites” (Robin 2015b:193).

Lastly, another funerary monument of uncertain provenance points towards a close relation between the Jewish community of the Levant and South Arabia. This is a bilingual inscription, written in Sabaic and Aramaic (Robin 2015b:191–92):

Leah funerary inscription (Aramaic) (translation adapted from Robin 2015b):

*hdh qbrwth d-l[?]h brt yhwth nšmt-h l-hyy [?]wlm w-tnwḥ w-t[?]mwd l-gwrl ḥyym l-qš
h-yryn [?]mn w-[?]mn šlwm*

“This is the grave of Leah, Yehuda’s daughter; may her soul find everlasting life; may she rest and rise again at the end of days. Amen, amen. Peace.”

Leah funerary inscription (Sabaic) (translation author):

qbwrt l[?]h bt ywdh l-nḥn-hw rḥmnn [?]mn s[?]lwm

“The grave of Leah, Yehuda’s daughter, may the Merciful let her/it rest.³⁷ Amen. Peace”

The material evidence supports the notion of an established Jewish community in South Arabia. The discovery of a seal stone depicting a Torah shrine and inscribed with the name Yiṣḥaq bar Ḥanīna at the cemetery of Zafār, the Himyarite capital is a clear indication of the physical presence of a South Arabian Jewish community (Yule and Galor 2008).³⁸ Similarly, an undated (but probably 2nd century) seal stone depicting a menorah and containing the name Ḥayyū [?]Ōdam (*ḥyw [?]dm*) and the excavation of the synagogue at the South Arabian port of Qāni^c suggests an

³⁷ The pronominal suffix *-h* could refer to either the deceased or the grave.

³⁸ However, as Yule and Galor note, similar seal stones have been found elsewhere in the Mediterranean, including in areas without sizable Jewish communities (2008:16)

integrated and permanent Jewish presence in South Arabia during the Ḥimyarite period (Robin 2004:891–92; Tobi 2013).

1.3.2.2. Christianity

Fewer primary sources exist with regards to South Arabia’s Christian community. Christianity likely came to South Arabia through missionary activity, either over the Red Sea or overland from Syria through the oasis of Naḡrān (Gajda 2009:248). The Roman ecclesial historian Philostorgius recounts that Christianity was first brought to South Arabia by the missionary Theophilus the Indian. According to Philostorgius, Theophilus was warmly received by the unnamed Ḥimyarite ruler, who promised to build three churches in his kingdom. Philostorgius further mentions that town of Naḡrān was particularly receptive to Christianity (Philostorgius 2007:41–42).

Compared to the relatively plentiful contemporaneous epigraphic material pertaining to Judaism in South Arabia, the first inscriptions that are unmistakably of a Christian nature follow the Aksumite invasion around 520 AD (Gajda 2009: 248). This means that much of the information about the spread of Christianity in the region comes from later church historians, hagiographies, and martyrologies, occasionally rendering it difficult to separate later ideological interpellations from actual historical events.

Some Christian epigraphy has been found in or near South Arabia. A 5th century inscription from Bir Ḥimā³⁹ was written by someone calling himself the “Servant of the Messiah” (*‘bd ʾlmsʾh*). The presence of a cross that was incised next to the inscription further underlines the Christian character of this inscription (Robin, Al-Ghabban, and Fāyīz Al-Saʾīd 2014:1125). Further north, a Greek inscription that reads “Lord, protect me” (Gr. *kyrie votheson me*) also seems to indicate a Christian author, although the same formula is attested (albeit rarely) in Jewish inscriptions (Gajda 2009:249–50).

Following the Aksumite invasion in the early 6th century AD, Christianity was temporarily made South Arabia’s state religion, although the royal inscriptions from the time reveal little about the theological convictions of its rulers. Nevertheless, it is thought that South Arabia’s Christian community likely consisted of two major sects: Nestorian and Miaphysite.

The Church leader Nestorius had been declared heretical following the Council of Chalcedon in 420 AD,⁴⁰ his followers had settled in various parts beyond the

³⁹ Although this particular inscription (Ḥimā-al-Musammāt PalAr 5) is undated, a similar inscription written in the same script mentions the year 364 of the Nabataean calendar, corresponding to 470 AD. The presence of the definite article ʾl- (i.e., *ʾal-) further suggests that it was made by an Arabic speaker.

⁴⁰ The theology of Nestorius (d. around 450 AD) differed from what would later become Chalcedonian Christianity regarding the nature of Christ, which postulated that Christ was both fully human and fully divine. Nestorian theology, briefly stated, states that Christ received the Holy Spirit when he was baptized, thus becoming fully divine at a later stage in his life (Vine 1937:28–29)

reach of the Byzantine Empire, including in South Arabia. The Greek author Cosmas Indicopleustes, who authored the *Christian Topography* mentions the presence of a Nestorian Christian community on the island of Socotra, halfway between Yemen and Somalia (Cosmas Indicopleustes 2010:119).⁴¹

The Miaphysite⁴² community seems to have been particularly active in Nağrān, which had had relatively close relations with the Aksumites since at least the 3rd century AD. If the claim that Nestorian in South Arabia were not as severely targeted by anti-Christian persecution can be taken at face value (Gajda 2009:250), it would imply that Miaphysites were also present in Zafār and Ṣanʿāw.

To summarize: by the beginning of the third century, it seems that both Christian and Jewish communities were present in or around South Arabia. Despite this, the Ḥimyarites did not initially show preference for either. Instead, the Ḥimyarites' monotheist inscriptions use broad terms to refer to God, such as "Lord of Heaven," as the following inscription shows:

Ag 3:1-6 (translation CSAI)

"Abiyada^c Yuwašši^c of Ḍarrān, Gamlān and ʿAḥram, governor of Dafīnat directed the covering with polished stones for the cladding of the basins, for the satisfaction of their lords Sa^cdam Yuhaskar and his sons, of the clan Hašbaḥ, may the God, Lord of Heaven, aid them"⁴³

1.3.3. Ḥimyarite monotheism

By the late 4th century AD, beginning with the reign of Malkīkarib Yuhaʿmin (383 – before 433 AD), Ḥimyarites adopted a broad kind of monotheism as their state religion (Gajda 2009:45–46). References to multiple deities disappear nearly entirely from the epigraphic corpus, showing that official rituals involving their worship had ceased. One of the latest official inscriptions to still invoke the worship of various gods, written by representatives of the tribe of Ḍū Yazʿan, likely dates to either the year 363 or 373 AD, with the first royal monotheistic inscriptions appearing in the year 383/384 AD (Gajda 2005:23–24). Furthermore, an inscription from near the temple of Taʿlab, dated to the year 400/401 AD mentions reparations performed near the temple's gate, but without containing references to the deity itself. This may indicate that the building itself was still in use, but that religious activities had stopped.

The Ḥimyarites' acceptance of monotheism is most evident in the deifics used from this period onwards. The singular God is referred in the inscriptions as

⁴¹ A Nestorian Christian community may have remained on Socotra until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century (Hatke 2019:44)

⁴² The term Miaphysite and Monophysite are occasionally used as synonyms, although most Oriental Orthodox Churches (i.e., the Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopian Churches) reject the equivocation of the two. Essentially, miaphysitism holds that Christ had a single nature (*physis*) which was both fully human and fully divine .

⁴³ Ag 3:1-6: ʿbyd^c Yws^{2c} ḏ-Ḍrn w-Gmln w-ʿhrm ʿqb Dtnt tqdm mqs^ctn ḏt ʿšbyn l-šhrm mqlḏltn l-mqḥ ʿmr²-hmw (S)^cdm Yhs^ckr w-bny-hw ʿlht Hsbḥ w-ʿln b^cl s^cmyrn l-yrd²n-hmw

“God” (*ʔl*), “the God” (*ʔln*; *ʔlhn*), whose epithets also include “Lord of Heaven” (*mrʔ* or *bʕl sʕmyn*) (Robin 2020a:73). This period also sees the first attestation of the term “The Merciful” (*Rḥmnn*) in South Arabia (Gajda 2005:, 2009:224–32).

Notably, although religious ideology changed with the Ḥimyarites’ acceptance of monotheism, religious formulae found in correspondences do not. Letters invoking monotheist deifics such as “the God” (*ʔln*) and “the Merciful” (*Rḥmnn*) do not show any substantive differences in phraseology compared to earlier, polytheistic invocations:

XBSB 141:3 (translation adapted from Stein):

w-ʕtr w-ʔlmqh l-yh(š)bḥnn l-kmw nʕmtm w-b-ḏt wfyym

“and may ʕAttar and ʔİlmūquh let grace and protection come to you.”

XBSB 125:5 (translation adapted from Stein):

w-rḥmnn ḏ-b-sʕmyn ykbrn ṭḥrg-kmw b-nʕmtm w-wfyym

“And may the Merciful (Rḥmnn), who is in Heaven, bless your rule with grace and protection.”

From the middle of the 5th century onwards, dating to the rule of Abīkarib ʔAsʕad (433–456), South Arabian monotheism began to take on a more strongly Judaizing trend. At this point, the Himyarite inscriptions begin to refer explicitly to “their people of Israel” (*sʕb-hmw ysʕrʔl/ysʕrʔl*) and to the construction of Jewish houses of worship (*mkrb[t]*) (Gajda 2009:236–38).

A case in point is an inscription commemorating the construction of a house, whose author Yahūdā Yakkuf (*Yankuf*), also added a smaller inscription in Hebrew on the inside of the inscription:⁴⁴

Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 1 (translation adapted from Gajda 1997):

b-rdʔ w-b-zkt mrʔ-hw ḏ-brʔ nʕsʕl-hw mrʔ ḥyn w-mwtn mrʔ sʕmyn w-ʔrdn ḏ-brʔ klm w-b-ʕlt sʕb-hw Ysʕrʔl

“[B]y the aid and grace of his Lord who has created him,⁴⁵ Lord of Life and Death, Lord of Heaven and Earth, who has created all, with the prayers of his People of Israel”

Abīkarib Asʕad was succeeded by his son and previous co-regent, Šuraḥbiʔil Yuʕfir (456 – ?). Šuraḥbiʔil Yuʕfir continued the religious ideology of his father, as inscriptions commemorating the reparation of the Marib dam refer to the single deity, “the God” (*ʔln*), described as “Lord of Heaven and Earth” (*mrʔ sʕmyn w-ʔrdn*). The dam inscriptions from Šuraḥbiʔil Yuʕfir’s reign are further characterized by their usage of the term “the Merciful” (*rḥmnn*), representing the first attestation of this term in the South Arabian inscriptions.

⁴⁴ “Yahūdā has written, may he be remembered well. Safety and peace, amen.” (*ktb Yhwḏʔ zkwʕ l-ṭwb ʔmn šlwm ʔmn*)

⁴⁵ Or possibly “his soul”, as Sabaic *nʕsʕl* can mean both.

CIH 44-45:4-6 (translation adapted from CSAI):

[... *b*]-*nšr w-rdʷ w-mqm Rḥm*]nn *w-b-nšr [mr²-hmw S²rḥbʷl Yʿf]r mlk [Sʷbʷ w-d-Rydn w-ḥdrmw w-Ym]nt*

“[W]ith the assistance, support, and strength of Raḥmānan and by the assistance of their Lord, Šuraḥbiʿīl Yuʿfir, king of Sabaʿ, Dū-Raydān, Ḥādrāmawt and Yamnat [...]

The reign of Šuraḥbiʿīl Yuʿfir was followed by that of Šuraḥbiʿīl Yakkuf (c. 470 or 472 – ?), who initially ruled alone. Later, Šuraḥbiʿīl continued the Ḥimyarite political tradition of co-regency by ruling together with his sons Laḥayʿat Yanūf and Maʿdīkarib Yunʿim. It is during the rule of Šuraḥbiʿīl Yakkuf that Ḥimyarite monotheism explicitly pivots towards Judaism. Several inscriptions from this reign show that members of the Ḥimyarite aristocracy had converted to Judaism (Robin 2015b:164–65).

The inscription Misʿal 3, written by Šuraḥbiʿīl Yakkuf and his two sons contains the phrase “in accordance with the *mikrābāt* and the Jews” (*b-ḥg mkrbtn w-ʿyhdn*), with the term *mikrābāt* (*mkrbt*) referring to Jewish places of worship (Prioleta and Arbach 2016:944–46). The Ethiopic hagiographic work *The Martyrdom of Azqir* claims that Ḥimyarite persecution of South Arabia’s Christian community began under the rule of Šuraḥbiʿīl’s rule (Beeston 2005b). Although there is no external evidence to corroborate this, it seems that the Ḥimyarite court became more strongly Judaized under Šuraḥbiʿīl Yakkuf’s reign (Prioleta and Arbach 2016).⁴⁶

From the end of the 5th century onwards, starting with the reign of Abīkarib Asʿad, Ḥimyarite monotheism began to take on a more explicit Judaic character. This trend can already be discerned from the rule of Martadʿīlān Yunʿim, as he mentions the construction of a *mkrb* and the enlargement of a *knsʿt*. These terms are likely related to the Gəʿəz term *mək^warāb*, and possibly refers to a Jewish place of worship (Gajda 1998, 2009). Although interpretation of both terms remain ambiguous, *mkrb* is likely related to Gəʿəz *mək^wrāb*, where it can mean either a temple or a synagogue, whereas *knsʿt* is almost certainly loaned from either Hebrew (*kneset*) or Aramaic (*kništā*). At the least, Martadʿīlān Yunʿim presented himself as sympathetic towards South Arabia’s Jewish community (Gajda 2009:71).

The years 500 – 525 saw significant political and religious changes in South Arabia.⁴⁷ Under the ruler Martadʿīlān Yanūf (c. 504 – c. 510 (?)) the state seemingly moved away from Judaism rather abruptly. The few inscriptions from Martadʿīlān Yanūf’s reign are devoid of specific references to Judaism or Christianity, marking a return to the broad monotheism of the previous century. Although it is unclear to what degree Aksumite Ethiopia was involved in this, it has been suggested that the Martadʿīlān Yanūf’s rise to power was the result of Aksumite diplomatic involvement (Hatke 2011:95–97).

⁴⁶ Pointing out structural and narratological differences with later politicized hagiographies, Hatke suggests that the *Martyrdom of Azqir* likely does reflect “mounting anti-Christian movement in late fifth-century Ḥimyar” (Hatke 2011:91)

⁴⁷ See also the discussion below, 1.4.3.

The reign of Maṣḍikarib Yanūf was followed by that of Maṣḍikarib Yuṣfir. Although the epigraphic record is silent on when his rule began and to which degree the Aksumites were involved in his rise to power, it is generally assumed that he was a Christian.⁴⁸ Explicit references to Maṣḍikarib's religious ideology appear only in later Christian martyrologies. For example, the Syriac hagiographic works *The New Letter of Simeon of Beth Arsham* and *The Book of the Himyarites* refer to the this ruler as Maṣḍikarim/Maṣḍōkarim, which is almost certainly based on the Maṣḍikarib Yuṣfir of the South Arabian inscriptions (Gajda 2009:81; Moberg 1924:lxxiv; Shahīd 1971:60).⁴⁹ At the same time, the religious vocabulary from the inscriptions made during his reign only use the term “the Merciful” (*rḥmnn*).

An independentist Ḥimyarite uprising (discussed in more detail below, 1.4.2.), eventually brought an end to Maṣḍikarib Yuṣfir's reign. This uprising was led by a local nobleman known as Yūsuf ʿAsʿar Yaṭʿar and lasted between 522 and 524. The political inscriptions from this period see a return to explicit references to Judaism. The inscription Ja 1028, written by several Ḥimyarite noblemen (*qayls*) on Yūsuf's begins with a standard formulaic reference to “the God” (*ʾlhn*), but further references the “burning of the church” (*dhr qls'n*), the “killing of the Ethiopians” (*hrg ʿḥbs'n*) and closes the inscription “in the name of the Merciful” (*ʿly s'm Rḥmnn [...]*) and ‘by the Lord of the Jews’ *rb Hd*.⁵⁰

Yūsuf's independentist revolt led to direct Ethiopian military intervention, resulting in the placement of the Ethiopian suzerain Sumūyafaʿ Ašwaʿ (*S'myff ʿsʿwʿ*) on the Ḥimyarite throne and the adoption of Christianity as Ḥimyar's state religion. The inscription Ist 7608 bis, written during the period of Sumūyafaʿ Ašwaʿ' s reign explicitly refers to Christianity, containing terms such as ‘The Holy Spirit’ (*mnfs' qds'*) and refers to ‘the Victorious Christ’ (*kršʿtsʿ ḡlbn*) as the ‘Son of the Merciful’ (*rḥmnn w-bn-hw*). When the Ethiopian general Abraha established his seemingly short-lived independent dynasty in South Arabia he maintained Christian ideology, using similar terminology in his inscriptions (Gajda 2009:117, 121–22).⁵¹

⁴⁸ Gajda state that “Maṣḍikarib fut, selon toute vraisemblance, placé sur le trône ḥimyarite par les Éthiopiens”, basing this statement predominantly on statements found in later Christian hagiographies. A notable difference in Maṣḍikarib's inscriptions compared to earlier royal Ḥimyarite inscriptions is the lack of references to ancestral predecessors, perhaps indicative of a non-standard rise to power.

⁴⁹ Although no explanation is given as to why the Syriac form of the name appears with an *m* rather than a *b*, a brief inspection of the manuscript facsimiles provided by Shahīd (1971) suggests that this may have been the result of a scribal error, folk etymology, or just an organic change in the transmission.

⁵⁰ This is in fact the only explicit reference to Judaism in the three inscriptions dating to Yūsuf's reign, which is, all things considered, relatively sparse. The vast majority of evidence for Yūsuf's adherence to Judaism comes, of course, from the later Muslim tradition as well as from Simeon Metaphrastes' *Martyrion Arethae* (Gajda 2009:; Guidi 1881; Shahīd 1971).

⁵¹ Notably, the ‘Holy Spirit’ is mentioned in Abraha's inscription as *rḥ qds'* (cf. Arabic (*al-*)*rūḥ al-quḍus*), rather than the Gəʿəz loan *mnfs' qds'* (Gəʿəz *manfas qeddūs*) (Leslau 1987:389).

1.3.4. The transition to Islam

The period following the collapse of central authority in South Arabia after the end of ʿAbraha’s reign is one for which the fewest primary sources exist (see also 1.4.4.). By the 9th century AD, Islam had been established as South Arabia’s state religion, although it is uncertain to which degree pre-Islamic beliefs continued to linger in the region.⁵² Early Muslim traditionalists mention the continued veneration of the local ʿAmmiʿanas in Ḥawlān following South Arabia’s nominal conversion to Islam, sometime during the 7th or 8th century (Robin 2009).

The degree to which South Arabian monotheism interacted with or influenced Islam remains controversial. Parallels between pre-Islamic South Arabian religion (both pre-monotheist and monotheist) and Islam exist on both the ritualistic and lexical level. Such parallels include an emphasis and requirement of ritual purity, which includes a prohibition on entering a temple while menstruating, after having sexual intercourse, or after having consumed garlic, onions, or other odorous foods (Robin 1991b:141).

Lexical parallels between the South Arabian epigraphy and the Quranic vocabulary also exist. In certain cases, a South Arabian source for Quranic terminology is almost certain. For example, terms such as ʿ*arim*, “dam” and *sabaʿ*, “Sheba” are almost certainly of South Arabian origin, both on cultural-historical and linguistic grounds (Elmaz 2016; Jeffery 2007:20–24). But less clear-cut examples also exist. The Quranic term *ṣalāt*, “prayer” is attested in late Sabaic inscriptions as *ṣlwt*. However, in this case, both terms are likely directly derived from Aramaic, which renders the notion of a South Arabian source for the Quranic term unlikely.

It is likely that during the 6th century AD, different monotheistic and prophetic movements arose arisen simultaneously on the Arabian Peninsula. From the 4th century AD onwards, polytheism was on the decline throughout most of Arabia, with monolatrous trend having developed in both Central and Northern Arabia (Al-Azmeh 2014:255–57). The Muslim tradition itself states that during the life of the Prophet Muhammad, other spiritual authorities also sought to establish themselves on the Arabian Peninsula (Ibn Ishāq 2001:648). In Central Arabia, the Prophet Musaylima was described as having spread a message similar to that of the Prophet Muhammad, speaking in rhymed prose (*sağʿ*), promoting moral purity, austerity, and calling for strict devotion to a single God, described as “the God” (*allāh*), “the Lord” (*al-rabb*), and above all, “The Merciful” (*ar-Raḥmān*) (Al-Makin 2010; Kister 2002).⁵³

Furthermore, late pre-Islamic and early Islamic epigraphy indicates a similar transitional monotheist movement in South and Central Arabia. An Arabic

⁵² Both Daum and Serjeant suggest that certain rituals in both northern Yemen and Ḥaḍramawt are likely to go back to pre-Islamic times. In particular, the connection of fertility and wedding rites are supposed to reflect pre-Islamic, originally polytheist rituals that were later incorporated into local Islamic structures (Daum 1987; Serjeant 1954).

⁵³ For example, Samji suggests that the Prophet Muḥammad consciously and eventually successfully merged the terms Allāh and al-Raḥmān in order to bolster his potential followers during the beginning of his prophetic career (2013:92–3).

inscription from Ġabal Dabūb, written in the miniscule South Arabian script substantially contains much of the same religious vocabulary also found in the Ĥimyarite monotheist inscriptions. This inscription begins with the *basmala* formula (*bs'mlh rḥmn*) and refers to a single deity, described therein as “the Lord of Heaven” (*rb s'mwt*) (Al-Jallad 2022; al-Ḥaġġ and Faq'as 2018).

Parallels to later Islamic religious formulae also occur in the late pre-Islamic South Arabian epigraphic corpus. As previously mentioned, monotheistic inscriptions from the 6th century contain references and were written in the name of ‘The Merciful’ (*Rḥmnn*), a clear parallel with the Arabic-Islamic deific *al-Raḥmān*. The introductory formulae ‘by the power, aid and mercy’ (*b-hyl w-rd[?]/nṣr w-rḥmt*) is consistently attested in the inscriptions dating to ʿAbraha’s rule and a near-parallel to the Islamic *basmala* formula appears in the Ġabal Dabūb inscription, which starts with the lines *bs'm lh rḥmn*. At the same time, the vocabulary of the Ġabal Dabūb inscriptions has its parallels outside the South Arabian cultural area, as Al-Jallad notes lexical similarities with the Safaitic inscriptions as well as the Peshitta (Al-Jallad 2022).

To summarize, the general picture of the religious situation in South Arabia between the 6th and 8th century is one of various monotheistic trends across the Arabian Peninsula. The lexical terminology found in the late pre-Islamic South Arabian inscriptions, the early Islamic epigraphy and the Quranic text indicate that most of the Arabian Peninsula had shifted to monotheism by this time. The emergence of Islam in Central Arabia thus represents an end point by which various Arabian monotheist traditions coalesced.

1.3.5. Conclusions

Epigraphic, archaeological, and documentary sources indicate that Jewish and Christian communities had been present in South Arabia from about the 3rd century onwards. During this time, the various South Arabian states had been predominantly polytheistic, although a general henotheist trend began to develop from the 1st century AD onwards. This was possibly influenced by the veneration of the celestial deity *Dū Samāwī*, whose worship spread to various parts of South Arabia through the settlement of Amirite tribesmen in different parts of the region.

Following the Ĥimyarites’ conquest of South Arabia in the 4th century, polytheism was finally abandoned in favor of a broad monotheism unaffiliated with either Judaism or Christianity. However, by the late 5th century AD, the Ĥimyarite kings explicitly pivoted towards Judaism, which had likely already gained sympathy at the Ĥimyarite court over the preceding decades. Religious tensions likely contributed to the violent conflict that erupted between the Ĥimyarites and Aksumite Ethiopia during the first half of the 5th century AD, with the latter eventually emerging victorious. For several decades, the official religious ideology of South Arabia was Christian.

Between the early 7th and 9th century, South Arabia became an integral part of the Islamic polity. Later Muslim sources describe the conversion of South Arabia as a sudden event. However, the available material indicates that South Arabia

gradually became a part of the Islamic world, as late pre-Islamic epigraphy shows monotheistic terminology remarkably similar to that which developed in Islam.

1.4. Political developments in late antique South Arabia

1.4.1. Introduction

The previous section outlined developments in religious beliefs and ideology between the 4th and 6th centuries AD. This section describes in more detail the political developments of this period.

By the beginning of the 6th century AD, the Ḥimyarites had effectively established hegemony over South Arabia and had even sought to extend the reach of their political power into Central Arabia. The kingdoms of Saba² and Ḥaḍramawt had functionally ceased to exist and were integrated into the Ḥimyarite kingdom during the late 3rd and early 4th centuries (Robin 1991b:53).

The state of Maṣīn had undergone a process of decline starting from the 2nd century BC onwards. A combination of ecological collapse, the diminishing importance of the overland trade routes across Arabia led to a period of de-urbanization during which the Minaean towns of Yaṭīll, Qarnaw and Kaminahū were abandoned (Schiettecatte and Arbach 2020).⁵⁴ As a result, this area came under the control of the tribe of Amīrum ([?]*mrm*), which had been present on the edges of the South Arabian cultural area.⁵⁵ The increased Amirite presence would have important socio-cultural and political consequences for the region.⁵⁶

This period also saw the intensification of political conflict between Ḥimyar and Aksum, which would finally come to a head with the Aksumite occupation of South Arabia in the early 520s AD. The cause of this conflict has often been seen in the context of the religious differences between Christian Aksum and Jewish Ḥimyar, although the Aksumites had already been present in South Arabia during the 3rd century AD (Hatke 2011:37–38).⁵⁷

⁵⁴ From the middle of the 1st century AD onwards, what was left of Maṣīn was re-integrated into the Sabaean kingdom. The final reference to Maṣīn occurs in a Sabaic inscription from the middle of the 1st century AD. This text refers to a legal issue concerning the inhabitants of Qarnaw and Šaḥbam and the tribe of Maṣīn. The fact that this document was signed by the ruler of Saba² indicates that the areas previously controlled by the Minaeans had fallen under Sabaean rule (Schiettecatte and Arbach 2020:267).

⁵⁵ As far as I am aware, there are no attestations of this tribal name in any of the Greek or Roman sources nor is the tribe [?]*Amīr* attested in traditional Arab genealogies from the medieval period.

⁵⁶ See also the discussion on the development of henotheism in South Arabia (1.3.2.).

⁵⁷ Regarding the justification of Aksumite military intervention in South Arabia see the discussion above (1.3.3.).

1.4.2. Political developments: 504 – 560 AD

During the late 5th century, Ḥimyar was ruled by Martadʿilān Yunʿim, who belonged to a dynasty established by his father Šuraḥbiʿīl Yakkuf (r. 462 – c. 475 (?)) (Gajda 2009:65–66). The epigraphic material suggests that during this period, the Ḥimyarite court gradually become more overtly Jewish, a process that had begun under the rule of Šuraḥbiʿīl Yakkuf (Gajda 2009:68–69).⁵⁸ This process was interrupted during the reign of Šuraḥbiʿīl’s successors, Martadʿilān Yanūf (before 504 – 509) and Maʿdīkarib Yuʿfir (after 509 – c. 521) (Gajda 2009:73–79).

Although the context of Martadʿilān’s rise to power is unknown, it seems that during his reign there were cordial relations with the Aksumites,⁵⁹ although there is no direct evidence to suggest that he was an Ethiopian vassal. This seems to have changed, however, with the rule of Maʿdīkarib Yuʿfir,⁶⁰ who was apparently placed on the Ḥimyarite throne with explicit Aksumite assistance (Gajda 2009:79)

Martadʿilān Yunʿim’s reign was apparently followed by an interregnum lasting several years. From at least 504 AD onwards, the Ḥimyarite kingdom was ruled by Martadʿilān Yanūf until at least 521 AD. It may be significant that none of the inscriptions made during Martadʿilān Yanūf’s reign mention any ancestry, which possibly suggests that he was not related to the previous royal family. Indirect evidence suggests that Martadʿilān Yanūf had positive relations with the Ethiopian Aksumites (Gajda 2009:75).

The rule of Maʿdīkarib Yuʿfir (reigned circa 510 (?) – 521) is traditionally seen as one of *de facto* Aksumite intervention in Ḥimyar (Gajda 2009:76–89; Hatke 2011:166–68). The royal inscriptions from this period do not make any overt references to Aksumite suzerainty but this is to be expected. The only explicit references to Aksumite intervention in South Arabia comes from the *Letter of Simeon of Bet Aršam*, a Syriac text that describes Maʿdīkarib as “A Christian king whom the Ethiopians had appointed in the land of the Ḥimyarites” (Guidi 1881:8, 417, Hatke 2011:166). This, of course, may have been a retroactive justification for a Christian invasion of South Arabia.

Whatever the circumstances of political succession in the region, it seems that in terms of actual policy there were relatively few changes. Both Martadʿilān Yanūf and Maʿdīkarib Yuʿfir continued the tradition of organizing raids into Central Arabia and attempted to expand Ḥimyarite influence into the same area (Gajda

⁵⁸ Gajda (2009:71) notes that the first attestations of the terms *knsʿt* and *mkrb* date to the reign of Martadʿilān Yunʿim. The term *knsʿt* is derived either directly from Hebrew *kneset* or from Aramaic *kništā* and could mean either “synagogue” or “assembly”; *mkrb* could be a re-purposed South Arabian term in the sense of “sanctuary”.

⁵⁹ Based on the presence of Ethiopian names and the noun *tnbltn*, “ambassadors”, it is thought that the inscription Gar AY 9d refers to the presence of Aksumite envoys at the Ḥimyarite court (Gajda 2009:75)

⁶⁰ Traditionally transcribed as *Yaʿfur* < *Yʿfir* but see the discussion on morphological borrowing (4.2.3.2) as to why the transcription *Yuʿfir* may be more accurate.

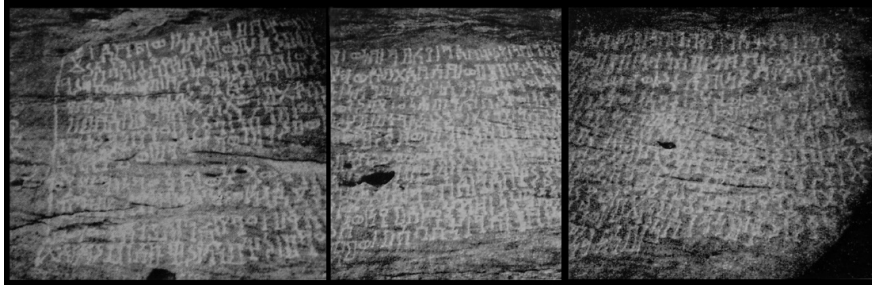
2009:75; Hatke 2011:168).⁶¹ Furthermore, despite the lack of explicit Judaic references in the inscriptions dating to their reign, there is no evidence of a shift towards Christianity either.

A more significant break with established political tradition came with the revolt of Yūsuf ʿAsʿar Yaʿfar, better known in the Islamic tradition as Yūsuf dū Nuwās. Whereas all Ḥimyarite rulers before him had taken over the Sabaeo-Ḥimyarite titulature “king of Saba and Dū-Raydān (etc.), in the two inscriptions dating to his reign, Yūsuf refers to himself as *mlk kl ʿsʿbn*, i.e., “king of all the tribes.”⁶²

The nature of Yūsuf’s revolt is often seen as a violent assertion of Ḥimyarite independence which led to massive anti-Christian persecution. However, the exact circumstances of Yūsuf’s revolt are poorly understood. There are two inscriptions (Ry 508 and Ja 507) that date to this period and one later inscription mentioning him in paraphrasis. The two events mentioned in these inscriptions indicative of religious persecution are the burning of the church in Zafār and the siege of Nagrān:

Ry 508:1-3, 6-7: (translation adapted from CSAI):

“The *qayl* Šaraḥaʿīl Yaqbul, son of Šuraḥbiʿīl Yakmul, of the Banū Yazʿan and Gadnum, Ḥubbum, Nasʿān and Ġabbaʿ recorded in this inscription what they accomplished in their military campaigns when they were with their Lord, Yūsuf ʿAsʿar Yaʿfar against the Ethiopians in Zafār when they burned the church (...) then the king sent them to make war against Nagrān (...). The king provided support against the Ethiopians to reinforce the chain of Maddab with his armies”⁶³



Inscription Ry 508 (CSAI)

⁶¹ The organization of military campaigns in order to establish political unity finds earlier parallels in South Arabia. For example, the Ḥimyarite ruler Tāʿrān Yuhanʿim (r. circa 330) raided into Central Arabia and along the Indian Ocean coast to ensure political cohesion, as much of the military leadership consisted of tribes previously allied to Ḥaḍramawt (Gajda and Robin 1994:133–34).

⁶² With regards to the interpretation of *šʿb*, see 1.1.1.

⁶³ Ry 508: *qyln Sʿrhʿl Yqbl bn Sʿrhbʿl Ykml bnw Yzʿn w-Gdnm w-Hbm w-Nsʿn w-Ġbʿ tsʿtrw b-ḡn msʿndn ḡ-sʿmw b-sʿbʿtm ʿwd-h k-hm ʿm mrʿ-hmw mlkn Ysʿf ʿsʿr ʿly ʿḥbsʿn b-Zfr w-dhrw qlsʿn (...) w-bn ḡky-hw mlkn l-qrn ʿly Ngrn (...) w-mlkn hrzy b-mqrnt Ḥbsʿt w-l-ḡnʿn sʿsʿlt Mdbn [...].*

Ry 507:1, 3-4, 11-12 (translation adapted from CSAI):

“May God to whom belong Heaven and Earth bless Yūsuf ʿAsʿar Yaʿar, king of all tribes, and may he bless their *qayls* and their leaders (...) their lord, the king Yūsuf ʿAsʿar Yaʿar, when he burned the church and killed the Ethiopians at Zafār (...) Then he sent [?] to Nagrān, in order to take hostages from them; but they committed aggression against them (...) This inscription was executed and written by the *qayl* Šarāhīl of Yazʿan, while taking measures (...) against Nagrān.”⁶⁴

Although it is likely that there was some suppression of South Arabia’s Christian population, there is little direct evidence of *en masse* persecutions. The hagiographic literature, such as the *Martyrdom of Saint Arethas* and the *Book of the Himyarites* that describe such persecutions in great detail should be approached with a good deal of caution.⁶⁵ As Hatke (2011:146) points out, the construction of churches in South Arabia served as much to promote Christianity as it did Aksumite political supremacy. The subsequent destruction of the church at Zafār can be seen as a symbol of re-establishing Himyarite independence. Furthermore, the hagiographic material itself allows some room for interpretation: Simeon’s *Letter* states that the Himyarites were aided by two “Christians in name alone”, which could be read as suggesting that the non-Monophysite Nestorian Christian population of South Arabia may not have been targeted by Yūsuf (Shahid 1971:171).

The Aksumites responded to Yūsuf’s revolt by sending a military force to South Arabia. The *qayl* Sumūyafaʿ ʿAšwaʿ,⁶⁶ who was mentioned as a supporter of the Himyarites in an inscription mentioned before, left an inscription around the year 530 AD, apparently confirming Yūsuf’s death in battle:

CIH 621 (translation adapted from CSAI):

“Sumūyafaʿ ʿAšwaʿ and his sons, Šuraḥbiʿīl Yakmal and Maʿdīkarib Yuʿfir, sons of Lahayʿat Yarḥam, the ones of Kalʿān and Dū-Yazʿan (...) wrote this inscription in the fortress of Muwayyat (?) (...) when they came back from the land of Ḥabašat, and the Ḥabašites sent the army to the land of Himyar, when they killed the king of the Himyarites and his ʿaqwāl.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ry 507: *l-ybrkn ʿlhn d-l-hw sʿl[myn w-ʿrdn mlkn Ysʿf ʿsʿr Ytʿr mlk kl] ʿsʿbn [w-l-ybrk]n ʿql-hmw w-mrʿsʿl-hmw (...) [mrʿ-hm]w mlkn Ysʿf ʿsʿr Ytʿr k-dhrw qlsʿn w-hrgw ʿḥbsʿn b-Zʿfr (...) w-k-dky ʿny b-ʿly Ngrn l-yhʿlnn bn-hmw rhnm f-ʿw yḥrb-h[mw] (...) w-k-hsʿtr dn msʿndn qln Sʿrhʿl d-Yzʿn k-qrn b-ʿsʿb d-Hmdn w-ʿrbn b-ʿly Ngrn Tw yqhn mlkn d-yrdyn*

⁶⁵ Descriptions such as the one found in the *Book of the Himyarites* and in Simeon of Bet Aršam’s *Letter* are often taken as fact. For example, Shahid (1995b:728) states that “the Monophysites [...] were also persecuted in South Arabia, and, what is more, literally massacred”.

⁶⁶ This Sumūyafaʿ ʿAšwaʿ is likely *not* the same as the Ethiopian suzerain (Hatke 2011:73).

⁶⁷ CIH 621:1-2, 6-9: *Sʿmyfʿ ʿsʿwʿ w-bny-hw Sʿrhʿbʿl Ykml w-Mʿdkrb Yʿfr bny Lhyʿt Yrḥm ʿlht Klʿn w-d-Yzʿn(...) sʿtrw dn msʿndn b-ʿrn Mwyt k-gbʿw bn ʿrd Ḥbsʿt w-ʿsʿyw ʿḥbsʿn zrfn b-ʿrd zrfn bʿrd Ḥmyrm k-hrgw mlk Ḥmyrm w-ʿqwl-hw*

The inscription's reference to Yūsuf as 'king of the Ḥimyarites,' rather than using the traditional Sabaeoan-Ḥimyarite royal titulature should probably be read as a retroactive denial of Yūsuf's attempt to establish himself as Ḥimyar's rightful ruler.

With Ethiopian support, Sumūyafa^s ʔAšwa^s was installed as a suzerain ruler of Ḥimyar. On the one hand, this marked a return to the political traditions established in earlier centuries: Sumūyafa^s returned to the Sabaeoan-Ḥimyarite titulature that had apparently been suspended during Yūsuf's rebellion. On the other hand, these inscriptions mark the first explicit reference to Christian imagery by invoking the Holy Ghost and Christ:

Ist 7608 bis (translation adapted from CSAI):

“[...] the Holy Spirit, Sumūyafa^s, king of Saba^ʔ [...] their lords, the Negus of the Aksumites [...] submitted themselves to the kings of Aksum [...] when he appointed them for the defense of the sea and the maintenance of order in Ḥimyar [...] in the name of Raḥmānān and his son Christ, the Victorious”⁶⁸

For all intents and purposes, any notion of Ḥimyarite independence had at this point come to an end. This is seemingly confirmed by external evidence, as the Roman author Procopius' *History of the Worlds*, states the following (Procopius and Dewing 2006:189):

“[...] Hellestheaeus, the king of the Aethiopians, who was a Christian and a most devoted adherent of this faith, discovered that a number of the Homeritae on the opposite mainland were oppressing the Christian there outrageously [...] He therefore collected a fleet of ships and an army and came against them, and he conquered them in battle and slew both the king and many of the Homeritae. He then set up in his stead a Christian king, a Homerite by birth, by name Esimiphaeus and, after ordaining that he should pay a tribute to the Aethiopians every year, returned to his home.”

Sometime between 531 and 540 AD, Sumūyafa^s's reign over South Arabia was followed by that of the Ethiopian general, ʔAbraha. Unlike his predecessor, there are no references to Aksumite subservience or interference, which suggests that Abraha truly attempted to establish an independent South Arabian dynasty in the tradition of the Ḥimyarite kingdom.⁶⁹ In fact, another inscription written by Abraha during his reign contains the same kind of political language found in the Ḥimyaritic royal inscriptions:

⁶⁸ Ist 7608 bis:1, 3, 8, 16: [w-mn]fs¹ qds¹ S¹myf^s ʔs²w² mlk S¹[b² ... ʔm]r²-hmw ngs²t ʔksmn [...] yt⁶bdnn l-ʔmlk ʔks¹mn (...) [...] tḥl-hmw l-z^s bḥrn w-l-šlh Ḥ[myrm] (...) [...] s¹m Rḥmnn w-bn-hw krs³ts³ ḡlbn.

⁶⁹ Both Procopius' *History* (Procopius and Dewing 2006:191) and the Islamic tradition portray Abraha's accession to power as essentially a coup d'état. Ibn Hišām gives a more fantastical account involving a dual between Abraha and an Ethiopian general known as ʔAryāt, who does not appear outside the Islamic sources (Ibn Iṣḥāq 2001:8)

CIH 541:1-8 (translation adapted from CSAI):

“By the power, assistance, and grace of Raḥmānān and his Messiah, and the Holy Spirit, I, ʾAbraha (...), king of Sabaʾ, dū-Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt and Yamnat, and their nomads Tawḍum and Tihāmat, wrote this inscription”⁷⁰

By his own admission, Abrahaʾs rise to power did not go unchallenged. The same inscription (CIH 541) suggests that he had to solidify control over South Arabia by force as the qayls of Sabaʾ (*ʾqwl sʾbʾ*) and the tribal confederation of Kinda had risen up against him (Robin 2012:80).⁷¹

In the years following, ʾAbraha followed in the tradition of the Ḥimyarite rulers before him by conducting a series of raids into Central Arabia (Piotrovskii 1985:23). The last Ḥimyarite campaign into Central Arabia had been under the reign of Maʿdīkarib Yaʿfur, nearly three decades earlier. ʾAbraha renewed these campaigns, likely to establish himself as a legitimate in the tradition of the earlier Ḥimyarite kings. In one of the final dated South Arabian inscriptions, written in the year 662 of the Ḥimyarite calendar (552 AD), ʾAbraha mentions the following:

Murayghan 3:1-4 (translation adapted from CSAI):

“The king ʾAbraha Zybm̄n king of Sabaʾ, Dū-Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt, Yamnat and their ʾaʿrāb of Tawḍ and Tihāmat wrote this inscription when he returned from the land of Maʿaddum (...) and he seized all the ʾaʿrāb of Mʿdm, Hagarum, Ḥaṭṭ, Ṭayyum, Yaṭrib and Guzām”⁷²

The term Zbymn, spelled in the inscription as *Zybm̄n*, is also found in two of ʾAbrahaʾs other inscriptions (CIH 541 and Ry 506). The meaning of this term is not entirely clear. Beeston originally proposed that the term should be read as a foreign name, i.e., Zēbēman (Beeston 1954:390). Although Rodinson agrees with this notion (Cohen and Rodinson 1965:127), the term has is often interpreted as an Ethiopicism meaning “he who is in Yemen”, i.e., *z-b-Ymn* (Gajda 2009:120; Nebes 2004:224).⁷³

The various tribal names mentioned in the inscription are easily recognizable as Maʿadd, Ṭayyiʿ and Ġudām, with the spelling of the latter revealing the change *ḡ > z*, possibly attesting to an Ethiopicism. Furthermore, Robin identified most of the toponyms found in the with those found in contemporaneous and later Arabic

⁷⁰ *b-ḥyl w-[r]dʾ w-rḥmt Rḥmn̄n w-Msʾh-hw w-Rḥ [q]dsʾ sʾtrw ḡn msʾndn ʾn ʾbrh ʿzly (...) mlk Sʾbʾ w-ḡ-Rydn w-Ḥḍrmwt w-Ym̄nt*

⁷¹ CIH 9-18: *qsʾd w-ḥḥlf b-gzmn yzd bn kbsʿt ḥlft-hmw ḡ-sʾthlḥfw ʿly kdt w-dʾ kn l-hw ḥlftn w-qsʾd w-ʿm-hw ʾqwl sʾbʾ ʾsʾhr̄n mrt w-ṭm̄nt w-ḥnsʿm w-mrt̄dm w-ḥnfm ḡ-ḥll w-ʿzʿnn ʾqwn̄ mʿdkrb bn sʾmyfʿ w-hʿn w-ʿḥwt-hw bny ʾsʾlm*

⁷² Murayghan 3:1-4: *mlkn ʾbrh zybm̄n mlk sʾbʾ w-ḡ-rydn w-ḥḍrmt w-ym̄nt w-ʿrb-hmw ṭwdm w-thmt sʾtrw ḡn sʾtr̄n k-ḡflw bn ʾrd mʿdm k-sʾtḡḡw ʿrb mʿdm ʿm-[n m]ḡrn w-trdw ʿmrm bn mḡrn w-sʾtḡḡw kl ʿrb mʿdm[w-h]gr̄m w-ḥṭ w-ṭym w-yṭrb w-gz(m)*

⁷³ As Gajda points out, there are too little references to give a definitive answer to this question, although the translation ‘who is in Yemen’ seems unlikely. The notion of ‘Yemen’ during this period is discussed in more detail in 5.2.

sources. Hagar and Ḥaṭṭ are to be identified with al-Hafūf in eastern Arabia, known as Gerrha in Greek sources, whereas Ḥaṭṭ was likely a fortress near the Persian Gulf (Robin and Tayran 2012:543–46).

Lastly, the invasion of ʿAbraha famously makes an appearance in later Islamic sources, where the events of the ‘Year of the Elephant’ (*ʿām al-fīl*) were seen as his attempt to conquer Mecca. Although the inscriptions. Although the epigraphy offers no support to the notion that ʿAbraha sought to conquer Mecca (or if that among his goals at all) later Muslim authors cast ʿAbraha’s invasion into a theological framework. This allowed them to interpret the 105th Quranic *sūra* (“The Elephant”, *al-Fīl*) within the context of the birth of the prophet Muhammad and the coming of Islam (Robin 2015a:36–48).

1.4.3. Political developments: 560 – 650 AD

The final dated South Arabian monumental inscription, which dates to 559/560 AD pertains to the repairs of a dam and, unfortunately, does not contain any references to the political circumstances in which it was written (Gajda 2009:149). Due to the cessation of the monumental tradition, there are no contemporaneous local sources that would shed light on what happened.

Comparable losses of writing systems have occurred several times in history. The Greek the Greek Dark Ages, for example, followed the Bronze Age Collapse, coinciding with the widespread civilizational deterioration throughout the eastern Mediterranean (Cline 2015:173). Similarly, the Rongorongo script of Rapanui (Easter Island) fell in disuse in only the span of several decades due to a variety of factors, including kidnappings, disease, and the abandonment of traditional education (Fischer 2005:63–64).

There is no evidence that suggests abrupt cataclysmic change, although South Arabia does appear to have been affected by processes of socio-economic decay that occurred throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East during the second half of the 6th century. The 5th and 6th centuries saw the recurrent appearance of various plague epidemics,⁷⁴ at least some of which also reached South Arabia (Eisenberg and Mordechai 2019).⁷⁵ This was one of many factors leading to the decrease of the Red Sea trade, together with the conflicts between Ḥimyar and Aksum, political instability in India, and the dramatic decrease in demand in the Mediterranean following the Justinian plague (Findlay and Lundahl 2017:127; Ladds 2015:41).

⁷⁴ Whether the various plague epidemics of the 5th and 6th century were all the result of the *Yersinia pestis* epidemic identified with that of Justinian Plague of 540–552 is not entirely clear (Eisenberg and Mordechai 2019:164–67).

⁷⁵ The evidence suggests a process of decentralization rather than complete societal collapse. The dam inscription of Abraha (CIH 541), for example, mentions the appearance of a plague (*dll*), which caused a temporary postponement of repairs made to the Marib dam (Nebes 2004:228).

During this period, several South Arabian sites were at least partially abandoned, most importantly the port of Qāni⁷⁶ and the Ḥimyarite capital at Zafār (Power 2011:81, 130–138). At the same time, the evidence suggests that this process was asymmetrical, with other urban centers rising to greater prominence. Specifically, Aden grew to be South Arabia’s main trading port, whereas Ṣan‘ā⁷⁷ developed into central South Arabia’s most important political center (Power 2011:134–35; Serjeant and Lewcock 1983:41). A more gradual process of growth can be seen in the development of Nağrān, which grew steadily between the 4th and 6th centuries AD (Basonbol 2021:112–113). The shift of power from central Southern Arabia to its peripheries can thus be compared to a similar shift that happened towards the 3rd century BC, when political power increasingly moved towards the South Arabian highlands (Korotayev 1993:56).

Despite the general paucity of primary documentary evidence, some contemporaneous sources shed some light on this period in South Arabia’s history. The notion that South Arabia came under the (nominal) control of Sassanian Persia seems to be virtually certain. The most detailed descriptions of Sassanian intervention in South Arabia stem from later Muslim sources, but a short passage from the contemporaneous Byzantine scholar Theophanes is preserved in the *Bibliothēka* of the 9th century Patriarch Photius (Photius 2003:78):⁷⁶

“This is what determined Khosrau to conduct an expedition against the Ethiopians, the Romans’ allies, otherwise called *Makrobites* and now called *Homerites*. The king of the Homerites, named Sanatourkes, was taken alive by the *mīranos*, the Persian general; the city was destroyed, and the population enslaved”⁷⁷

Later Muslim accounts also mention that South Arabia came under the control of the Sassanians. However, these describe the Sassanian military presence as the result of an invitation by a local Ḥimyarite nobleman, Sayf b. ʿDī Yazan (Ibn Hišām 1990:64–70; Ibn Ishāq 2001:29–33; al-Mas‘ūdī 2011:308–310; al-Ṭabarī 1999:236–37). After Sayf’s death, the Sassanians sent a governor and a military contingent to take control over the region (Gajda 2009:152–54). These accounts also state that that the Sassanians that remained in South Arabia intermarried with local women, and that their descendants were known as the *‘abnā’ al-furs*. These would later come to play a significant political role in early Islamic South Arabia (Crone 1998:2; Kommer, Liccardo, and Nowak 2018:37–39).

Virtually no contemporaneous sources pertaining to the period between circa 570 and 700 AD have yet been discovered. Later Muslim accounts state that in the period following Sayf b. ʿDī Yazan’s death, South Arabia underwent a period of political fragmentation, with different political factions attempting to maintain

⁷⁶ Sayf b. ʿDī Yazan would later come to figure more prominently in Islamic literature, with his legendary exploits being collected in the *Sīrat Sayf ibn ʿDī Yazan* (Blatherwick 2016:17–25).

⁷⁷ *Dio kai o Xosroēs ep Aithiopas Filous ontas Rōmaiois tous palai men Makrobious nun de Omēritas kaloumenous estrateuse kai ton te Basilea tōn Omēritōn Sanatourkēn dia mēranous tou Persōn strategou eksōgrēse, ten te polis autōn ekseporthēse kai to ethnos parestēsato* (Photius 2003:78)

or expand their control over the region (Al-Medej 1983:13–22). According to these accounts, the aforementioned descendants of the Persian governors and their entourages, the *ʿabnāʿ al-furs*, were able to gain control over certain urban centers, particularly Ṣanʿāʿ and ʿAdan. At the same time, several influential tribal confederacies emerged during this period and sought to take control over parts of South Arabia, respectively Ḥimyar, Hamdān, Maḍḥiḡ and Kinda. It is noteworthy that latter two of these tribal confederacies had previously been suzerain to the Ḥimyarite kings. Assuming that the Muslim accounts can be taken at face value, this would indicate a serious degradation of central authority and a shift in power away from central and southern Yemen.

These different factions emerged along similar political fault lines that had existed in the pre-Islamic period. An important difference, however, was that the emergence of the Islamic polity in central West Arabia opened new avenues of establishing political authority and legitimacy. Later Muslim accounts state that South Arabia’s different social factions sent envoys to the Prophet. In the case of Ḥimyar, the Prophet allegedly promised them full retention of their property, political titles and sovereignty over their lands (Al-Medej 1983:24; Ibn Ishāq 2001:643; Ṭabarī and Poonawala 1990:74–76).⁷⁸ Similarly, the correspondence between Bāḍān, the last Sassanian governor in Ṣanʿāʿ and primary representative of the *ʿabnāʿ* and the Prophet Muḥammad supposedly led to the former’s conversion and subsequent appointment as governor over all Yemen (Balādhurī and Hitti 1916:106; Ṭabarī and Fishbein 1997; Watt 1956:122).⁷⁹

Whether these traditions genuinely reflect early correspondences between the Prophet and South Arabia’s tribal leaders is doubtful. An early pivot towards the Muslim community, particularly following Muḥammad’s success in retaking Mecca – would potentially have been politically advantageous. For example, it is recounted that Fayrūz al-Daylāmī, the leader of the *ʿabnāʿ* in Ṣanʿāʿ was able to outmaneuver his political opponents twice by carefully negotiating an alliance with various Islamic groups, first during the *ridḍa* wars and secondly during the

⁷⁸ Medej notes that the way the Prophet received envoys from the different South Arabian tribes could differ significantly (Al-Medej 1983:24–27) Whether this is an historically accurate reflection of the South Arabians’ interactions with the Prophet or a politicized representation to retroactively imbue certain tribes with additional religious authority is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

⁷⁹ Smith states that “[T]he fifth Persian governor in the Yemen, Bāḍhān [*sic*] embraced Islam together, if we are to believe the Arab historians, with the whole of the population of the country”. However, Ṭabarī’s description is not unambivalent. Earlier, Ṭabarī states that “the *ʿabnāʿ* and those Persians who were with them in Persian converted to Islam” (*fa-ʿaslama wa-ʿaslamati l-ʿabnāʿū maʿa-hū min fārisa man kāna min-hum bil-l-yaman*). However, at a later point references “when Baḍām [*sic*] converted to Islam and Yaman converted with him” (al-Ṭabarī 1882:1575). Contradictory accounts regarding the date and extent of the *ʿabnāʿ*’s conversion to Islam (either 7/628-9 or 10/631-2; and whether Bāḍān/Bāḍām converted to Islam before his death or not, give the impression of a highly chaotic and politically unstable situation in South Arabia around the rise of Islam. For the various accounts, see Al-Medej (1983:61–62).

civil war between Muṣāwiya and ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (Madʿaj 1988:54; Serjeant and Lewcock 1983:52).

Alternatively, the accounts concerning the correspondence(s) between the Prophet and the various South Arabian factions may represent later fabrications. Later accounts note that the Prophet and his immediate successors tended to acknowledge the authority of local tribal chiefs, they would occasionally appoint governors to the region with their residence in Ṣanʿāʾ (Madelung 2004:155; Madʿaj 1988:110; Serjeant and Lewcock 1983:54). Traditions attributed to the Prophet supposedly securing the autonomy of South Arabian tribal chiefs could be politically useful in periods where appointed governors attempted to forcefully establish their authority beyond Ṣanʿāʾ’s borders (Al-Medej 1983:187, 280).⁸⁰

1.4.4. Political developments: 650 – 850 AD

The ideological differences that emerged after the end of hostilities between ʿAlī and Muṣāwiya in 657 AD also impacted South Arabia. Following the shift of the caliph’s seat from Mecca to Umayyad Damascus and Abbasid Baghdad, establishing central authority over the region proved even more difficult. Later Muslim authors came to describe South Arabia as a hotbed of anti-Umayyad sectarian activity. As previously stated, a pro-Alid governor continued to rule in Ṣanʿāʾ at least until 40/660-1, when Muṣāwiya sent an armed force to take control of the region (Al-Medej 1983:245–58; Madelung 2004:298, 304–5). Following the death of Muṣāwiya in 60/680, South Arabia temporarily fell under the rule of ʿAbdullah b. al-Zubayr, who had established himself as a counter-caliph in Mecca, as there are reports that Ibn al-Zubayr appointed governors to Ṣanʿāʾ between 64/683 and 73/692 (Serjeant and Lewcock 1983:51–50).

South Arabia’s distance from central authority in Syria and Iraq made it an attractive region for heterodox political-religious activity. In 744, the first of these movements appeared in the Ḥaḍramawt: Yaḥyā al-Kindī, naming himself Ṭālib al-Ḥaqq rebelled against the Umayyads from his base in Ḥaḍramawt and was able to conquer Ṣanʿāʾ and large parts of Yemen, up to and including the Hijaz. At this point, Marwān II (ruled 744 – 750) sent an armed force to quell the rebellion (al-Ḥāmidī 2003:203–12). Although lasting control over most of Yemen and the Hijaz proved unsuccessful, al-Kindī’s revolt did succeed at permanently removing Ḥaḍramawt from Umayyad and Abbasid authority (Wilkinson 2010:182–84).

At least nominally, South Arabia remained under the control of the Abbasid caliphate until the beginning of the 9th century AD. The civil war that broke out between the brothers al-ʿAmīn and al-Maʾmūn (813–833) had had a catastrophic effect on the Abbasids’ ability to effectively govern the caliphate. Although al-Maʾmūn was eventually able to effectively re-assert control over most provinces

⁸⁰ The possibility that such traditions were indeed later fabrications or amendments, is indicated by the variations in the names mentioned in the Prophet’s letter. Al-Balāḍurī already noted that according to Ibn al-Kalbī, the Prophet’s letter was addressed to ʿArīb b. ʿAbd Kulāl (Ibn Durayd 1411:526)

previously administered by the Abbasids, certain areas were irrevocably lost both *de jure* and *de facto* (Kennedy 2008:154–56).

Taking advantage of the Abbasids' internal weakness the South Arabian tribes of Ṣakk and Aṣā'ir staged a rebellion in the Tihāma in 203-204/819. Occupied with managing the fall-out of the civil war, with several other provinces still in open rebellion (Kennedy 2008:155), al-Ma'mūn decided instead to appoint Muḥammad b. Ṣabdullāh b. Ziyād as governor of Yemen and sent him to the Tihāma with an armed force to reinstate Abbasid authority. However, Ibn Ziyād instead decided to found the city of Zabīd and established a *de facto* independent dynasty, which would end up ruling much of the Tihāma for the next two centuries (Peli 2008:251; Wilson 1985:31). At their zenith, the Ziyadids' political authority stretched all along the southwestern coastal plain, past the Bab al-Mandab and eastwards towards Aden on the Indian Ocean shore. Despite their lack of connection to any of the influential tribal groups of South Arabia, the Ziyādids were still able to dominate large parts of Yemen (Geddes 1959:95).

Although Ibn Ziyād had been appointed as governor of all of Yemen, the Ziyādids' power never stretched into the South Arabian highlands or over to the other side of the Sarawāt mountain range. Instead, the power struggle in the Abbasid caliphate allowed for the first lasting independent local South Arabian dynasties to emerge within the span of a decade.

Between 212-14/828-30, in the region of al-Kalā', Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Manāḥī had declared himself independent and was able to stave off two Abbasid attempts to regain control of the region. From his fortress at Raymat Manāḥ and Ḡabal Tūmān,⁸¹ Ibrāhīm al-Manāḥī succeeded in spreading his influence throughout the region and established a dynasty that was to survive for about a century (Al-Medej 1983:360–62). Further north, Yu'fir b. Ṣabd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥiwālī north-west of revolted against the Abbasids from his stronghold at Šibām Kawkabān.

From the year 227/841-2 onwards, Yu'fir was able to establish himself in Ṣanā' and was eventually recognized as its governor (Serjeant and Lewcock 1983:55). In the following decades, the Yu'firids effectively broke down Abbasid attempts at establishing some kind of authority over the region, either through diplomatic or military means (Al-Medej 1983:367–71).

By the reign of al-Mutawakkil (205-247/847-860), the Abbasid caliphs had ceased to send new governors to Yemen, which *de facto* gave the Yu'firids an air of legitimacy in their claims over the region (Al-Medej 1983:372). Although their power would wax and wane in the time following, Yu'firids' conquered parts of the Ḥaḍramawt and would remain in control of sizable parts of South Arabia between Ṣa'da and Ṣanā' until the beginning of the 4th/11th century (Geddes 1959:54–67; Serjeant and Lewcock 1983:55–57).

It is worth noting that both the personal name Yu'fir (Sab. *Y'fr*) and the tribal name Dū Ḥiwāl (Sab. *ḍ-Ḥwlm*), as well as the lineage Manāḥ (Sab. *Mnhm*) are

⁸¹ The same location is attested in the South Arabian inscriptions as *ʿrn tm*, i.e., the mountain Tūmān (Höfner AF 3:4)

attested in the pre-Islamic epigraphy, showing a degree of continuity between the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods (Robin and Schiettecatte 2013:186).

1.4.5. Conclusions

The period between the 6th and the 9th century saw fundamental political changes in South Arabia. Over the span of three centuries, the rulers of South Arabia had included the Ḥimyarite kings, split between independentist and pro-Ethiopian factions, a Himyarite suzerain to an Aksumite king and, finally, an Ethiopian general presenting himself as a legitimate Ḥimyarite ruler. Although sources are few, it appears that subsequently, South Arabia then came under the control of Sassanian Persia before a period of disintegration, with different social factions all seeking to take control over the region. It is notable that this period saw the increased influence of tribal confederacies that had in earlier centuries been subservient to the Ḥimyarite kings.

The social and ideological cohesion that the Islamic polity offered proved to be temporary. Immediately following the death of the Prophet, the allegiance of the South Arabian tribes to his successors immediately fell into doubt. The death of Mu'āwiya, the ensuing political chaos and the region's overall remoteness allowed for heterodox movements to develop within South Arabia. The central government's attempts to re-establish political authority over the region would occasionally be successful, but eventually turned out to be impossible.

By the beginning of the 9th century, the unfolding Abbasid civil war allowed South Arabia's dynasties to successfully assert themselves politically. Although the founders of the Yu'firid and Manāḥid dynasties represented tribal groups that had been present in South Arabia for centuries, it is notable that the Ziyādids were able to establish themselves in much of the region without relying on South Arabian heritage. The question of political legitimacy during the same period will be taken up in more detail in the following section.

In conclusion, during the three centuries treated in this section, political power in South Arabia was frequently contested, underwent expansion, contraction, and eventually disintegration. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the same socio-political fault lines that separated the South Arabian highlands from the lowlands and the coastal plain, which had existed during the pre-Islamic period continued to exist throughout the early Islamic period.

1.5. Legitimacy and authority in Late Antique South Arabia

During Late Antiquity, new forms of establishing political legitimacy emerged throughout Europe and the Middle East. Throughout the late antique Mediterranean and Middle East, the 5th to 8th saw the breakdown of old political structures and their replacement with new ones (Pohl 2021). South Arabia underwent similar developments during this time period. This section expands on the discussion of the political events of the 6th to 9th centuries AD by investigating how South Arabia's rulers legitimized their authority during the same period.

1.5.1. The late pre-Islamic period

Despite the profound socio-political changes that occurred during the 6th century AD, the Sabaeen political tradition that had been established in the 6th century BC adopted and modified by the Ḥimyarites in the 2nd century AD displayed a remarkable longevity. Neither the Ḥimyarites' conversion to monotheism, nor the pivot towards Judaism under the rule of Šuraḥbī'īl Yakkuf and his successors affected the way the Ḥimyarites legitimized their rule. The same tradition continued under the rule of the Aksumite-aligned rulers Marṭad'īlān Yun'īm and Ma'dīkarib Yanūf. In fact, the Sabaeen-Ḥimyarite political tradition was considered so strong, that both the Aksumite suzerain Sumūyafa^s 'Ašwa^s and the general 'Abraha appropriated the Sabaeen-Ḥimyarite tradition, seeking to legitimize themselves in the eyes of their South Arabian subjects.⁸²

At the same time, as Hatke (2011) established, an irredentist political ideology developed in Aksumite Ethiopia from the 4th century AD, which also laid claim to South Arabia. The inscriptions from the reign of the rulers Ousanos and 'Ezānā give examples of this irredentist attitude. In stelae written in Gəṣ'əz, Greek and in a kind of faux-Sabaic,⁸³ Ousanos and 'Ezānā call themselves as the kings of “Aksum, Ḥimyar and Raydān, Ḥabašat, (Salḥīn) and Saba’.”⁸⁴ Although there is no evidence of a continued Aksumite political presence in South Arabia between the late 3rd and early 6th century, it is clear that the Aksumite rulers continued to lay claim over the region despite their lack of *de facto* control (Hatke 2011:53–63)

Despite competing and mutually exclusive claims over Southwest Arabia, regardless of the political situation on the ground, the Sabaeen-Ḥimyarite political tradition remained the most important source of political legitimacy in South

⁸² Attempts to establish political continuity with previous rulers are historically common. The Ostrogothic king Theoderic styled himself *Augustus* and *imperator*, while after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Mehmet II adopted the title *kayser-i rüm*, i.e., “Emperor of Rome” (Arnold 2018:73-4; Scott and Ágoston 2015:474)

⁸³ The “Sabaic” portions of the inscriptions show a mere superficial understanding of the language. The Sabaic – unlike the Ethiopic – is written from right-to-left, but are full of grammatical errors (Sima 2003)

⁸⁴ See, for example RIE 185:I: 'zn mlk 'ks'mm w-d-ḥmrm w-rydnm w-ḥbs'tm w-sb'm w-s'llḥm; 'zn ngś 'ksm w-ḥmyr w-ks w-sb' w-ḥbšt, RIE 185 II; [ʿ]ydn mlk 'ks'wm w-ḥmrm w-rydnm w-sb'm w-ḥbs'tm, and RIE 185b I: 'zn ngś 'ksm w-ḥmr w-rd<n> w-ks w-sb' w-sllḥn.

Arabia. It is therefore intriguing that the epigraphic evidence seems to suggest that this tradition was abandoned during Yūsuf ʿAsʿar Yaʿtar’s brief and contested rule in South Arabia. The inscriptions from Yūsuf’s reign refer to as ‘king of all tribes’ (*mlk kl ʿsʿbn*). This is in stark contrast with the Sabaean-Ḥimyaritic titulature that had been used by all Ḥimyarite rulers thus far.

The change in titulature could be attributed to the fact that, as far as we know, Yūsuf did not have any inscriptions written himself. However, it is worth mentioning that inscriptions written on behalf of a Ḥimyarite king normally maintain the complete royal titulature.⁸⁵ Therefore, it is plausible to assume that the titulature was chosen on purpose. The question, of course, is what motivated this.

The reason for the change in titulature is often attributed to Yūsuf’s rise to power as the result of a *coup d’état* and it is usually suggested that this is due to the fact that Yūsuf was essentially an usurper (Gajda 2009:86; Hatke 2011:198; Nebes 2008). Later Muslim accounts stating that Yūsuf had been a member of the Ḥimyarite aristocracy are difficult, if not impossible, to verify,⁸⁶ but even if that were not the case, lack of relation to a ruling clan would not have been sufficient reason to abandon the established tradition. A case in point is the fact that the three pro-Ethiopian rulers Martadʿilān Yunʿim, Maʿdīkarib Yanūf and Sumūyafaʿ Ašwaʿ also applied the Sabaean-Ḥimyarite royal titulature. It stands to reason that if Yūsuf’s main intent was to present himself as a legitimate Ḥimyarite ruler he simply would have latched on the tradition already in place.

Instead, it is possible that the political conflicts of the earlier 6th century exercised pressure on the legitimacy associated with the Sabaean-Ḥimyarite tradition itself. In discussing the ideological roots of the Roman emperor Constantine’s rise to power, Kelly (1999:182–83) notes that “an empire is held together not only by military force and an efficient administration; it also requires an effective ideology to proclaim to all involved the rightness and legitimacy of its government.”

By presenting himself as the “king of all the tribes” (*mlk kl ʿsʿbn*), perhaps Yūsuf sought to draw on a new source of legitimacy in the eyes of his followers, one that superseded that of the Sabaean-Ḥimyarite tradition, which had been eroded after decades of instability and foreign intervention. Usage of the term *ʿsʿb* is also unlikely to be coincidental. Furthermore, whereas the term *sʿb* could be used invariably to virtually any social group in South Arabia, it is notably *not* used in combination with *ḥbsʿ[ʿ]*, i.e., “Ethiopians”.⁸⁷ It is possible that Yūsuf’s decision to use this term was to create a new overarching South Arabian political identity

⁸⁵ For example, the inscription CIH 44+45, which was written on behalf of the ruler Šuraḥbiʿīl Yuʿfir (end of the 5th century) “by the aid of his Lord, Šuraḥbiʿīl Yuʿfir, king of Sabaʿ, Dū-Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt and Yamnat” (*b-nṣr mrʿ-hmw Sʿrḥbʿl Yʿfr mlk sʿbʿ w-d-rydn w-ḥḍrmwt w-ymnt*).

⁸⁶ As with his predecessors, there are no earlier references to Yūsuf in the epigraphic corpus; the Arabic tradition states that he was a Ḥimyarite nobleman, possibly a member of the tribe Yazan (Gajda 2009:85)

⁸⁷ In the South Arabian inscriptions, Aksumite military contingents are referred to with the term *ʿḥzb*, derived from Geʿez *ʿahzāb*; Aksumite settlements in the Tihāma are named *ʿšd*, similarly derived from Geʿez *ʿaʿšād* (Hatke 2020:292–293).

that excluded Ethiopians – precisely the opposite of what the Aksumite rulers Ousaios and Kālēb had done.

Yūsuf’s failure to permanently take control over South Arabia makes it difficult to assess his intentions. South Arabia’s two subsequent rulers, Sumūyafaʿ ʿAšwaʿ and ʿAbraha returned to the earlier Sabaeen-Himyarite royal titulature, and with the end of the latter’s reign this political tradition came to a final end. Perhaps hitherto undiscovered inscriptions may shed more light on Yūsuf’s political ambitions.

1.5.2. The early Islamic period

Following the end of ʿAbraha’s rule the Sabaeen-Himyarite political tradition came to an end. There is no evidence to suggest that any of the independent political factions that came to control (parts of) South Arabia ever attempted to resurrect the Sabaeen-Himyarite royal titulature.

As previously discussed, various political factions rose to power in South Arabia throughout the early Islamic period (1.3.4). However, seemingly none of them sought to revive the Sabaeen-Himyaritic political tradition. This can be juxtaposed with the political situation in Iran: following the breakdown of Abbasid political authority in Iran, the Buyid ruler ʿAḏūḏ al-Dawla (r. 338-72/949-83) and his successors successfully, albeit temporarily, laid claim on the pre-Islamic title Šāhānšāh (Blois 2012:190–91). In this regard, the permanent abandonment of South Arabia’s pre-Islamic political traditions is striking.

Yet there remained an important political connection to South Arabia’s political history. Real or imagined connections to the region’s pre-Islamic rulers continued to play a key role in the legitimization of South Arabia’s political factions. Both the Yuʿfirids and the Manāḥids considered themselves the descendants and, to a degree, the inheritors of the Himyarites’ political legitimacy. It is not a coincidence that Yuʿfir b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān’s and Ibrāhīm al-Mānāḥi’s alleged ancestors Dū Maqār and Dū Manāḥ were included in the *maṭāmina*, a group of influential *qayls* who supposedly ruled South Arabia after the death of Yūsuf dū Nuwās (Robin 1991a:829–30). As Robin states (1991a:831–32):

“The dissolution of the Abbasid empire left the field open to many ambitions, particularly in Yemen where the struggles for power became fierce. In this context, prestigious Himyarite ancestors gave an incontestable historical legitimacy [...]”

At the same time, different sources of political legitimacy emerged. South Arabia’s ruling political factions were apparently able to negotiate for and largely retain their political autonomy and sovereignty with Prophet’s (and his successors) acquiescence. Furthermore, in the period following the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate, South Arabia became home to ideological movements in opposition to the government in Damascus. The central government’s inability to effectively quash the Ibāḏī and Zaydī movements demonstrates that the combination of geographic remoteness, internal defensibility and appellations to

religious devotion made for powerful grounds of establishing a political counter-movement.⁸⁸

However, different sources of authority and legitimacy were not necessarily mutually exclusive. This is further exemplified by the short-lived rebellion of ʿAbbād al-Ruʿaynī (107/725-6), whose *nisba* suggests a relation with the South Arabian clan ʿDū Ruʿayn. This, too, was no coincidence. The clan ʿDū Ruʿayn figured heavily in Umayyad-period apocalyptic and eschatological accounts, most likely due to the influence of the South Arabian traditionalist Kaʿb al-ʿAḥbar (Madelung 1986:143). According to such accounts, a form of South Arabian hegemony would be (re-)established in the Muslim community by “the savior of Ḥimyar” (*manṣūr Ḥimyar*), and that “the Ruʿaynī would come at the end of time” (*yakūn al-ruʿaynī fī ʿaḥīr al-zamān*) (Ibn al-Ḥusayn 1968:119).⁸⁹

The later South Arabian scholar al-Hamdānī would vehemently deny that ʿAbbād had had any relation to a South Arabian clan, ʿDū Ruʿayn or other, and, along with al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kaṭīr considered him a *ḥārīgī*.⁹⁰ However, the controversy surrounding ʿAbbād al-Ruʿaynī’s lineage shows that attempts to establish political independence could be based on genealogical and religious-ideological grounds at the same time.⁹¹

1.6. Conclusions

The first chapter of this dissertation laid down the various forms of socio-political, and religious organization that existed in South Arabia in Late Antiquity. It was shown how, despite significant changes between the late 4th and early 6th centuries, the Sabaean-Ḥimyarite model of governance and its associated sources of establishing political authority and legitimacy survived until the middle of the 6th century AD. It was also shown how the different political entities controlled South Arabia during this time century continued the political traditions inherited from the Sabaeans and Ḥimyarites.

Furthermore, we have seen that certain aspects of South Arabian socio-political organization transitioned smoothly between the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic

⁸⁸ In 897, the Zaydi leader Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, later known as al-Hādī ʿilā l-Ḥaqq was able to rally enough support to declare himself Imām and founded a dynasty that came to control parts of northern South Arabia from the city of Ṣaʿda (Geddes 1959). The 16th century *Ṣirat al-Hādī ʿilā l-Ḥaqq* portrays South Arabia before Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn’s coming as lawless, having accepted Islam only superficially, which forced the Zaydī leader to return to the Ḥiḡāz after one of their leaders refused to give up consuming wine.

⁸⁹ See also the discussion on the assertion of South Arabian identity during the early Islamic period (5.2.2.2.)

⁹⁰ Al-Medej, following al-Hamdānī, goes out of his way to deny any connection with South Arabia, whereas the modern Yemeni scholar al-Šamāḥī considers ʿAbbād a *qayl* (Al-Medej 1983:282; al-Šamāḥī 1976:101)

⁹¹ Rodionov suggests that the Ibādī rebellion in Ḥaḍramawt may have been inspired by the Kinda’s desire to enact revenge against the Umayyad regime (Rodionov 2018:108)

periods. South Arabia's basic social divisions and system of governance remained largely intact. Similarly, although South Arabia had now become a de jure part of the Islamic polity, effective political power largely remained in the hands of the same factions that had controlled different parts of the region in the pre-Islamic period. Furthermore, it was shown how these different political factions attempted to gain independence, either through negotiations with the central caliphal government in Medina, Damascus, and Baghdad or through armed resistance. Finally, as Abbasid authority began to break down in the beginning of the 3rd/9th century, similar political fault lines to the ones that had existed in the pre-Islamic period re-emerged.

In order to justify their independence, the leaders of South Arabia's political factions legitimized themselves in different manners, either through genealogical and religious means, or occasionally both. However, although the Yuḥfirids and the Manāḥids both claimed descent from the pre-Islamic Ḥimyarites, at no point did either party attempt to revitalize the South Arabian royal titlature or reinstate the tradition of writing inscriptions. Not only had the tradition of writing inscriptions disappeared, by the early Islamic period, it appears that the ability to read and decipher them became quickly limited to a small group of specialists.⁹² In light of the pervasiveness of certain aspects of South Arabia's political culture, the speed with which South Arabia's written culture became inaccessible is remarkable.

The following chapters will delve more deeply into how processes of linguistic change took place in South Arabia in Late Antiquity and how these relate to the socio-political issues outlined in this chapter.

⁹² The issue of the retention of the South Arabian script in the early Islamic period is expanded upon in 4.4., whereas the function of the inscriptions in medieval Islam is discussed in 5.2.2.2.

CHAPTER 2: The languages of South Arabia

This chapter presents a brief overview of the languages in use in South Arabia during the period under discussion. All of languages outlined in this chapter are (West) Semitic languages. First, a brief overview the shared typological features of Semitic will be given. Subsequently, the languages the following languages will be discussed:

1. Late Sabaic
2. Modern South Arabian
3. Gəʿəz (Old Ethiopic)
4. Arabic, with a particular focus on pre-Islamic and Yemeni Arabic

The overview provided in this chapter are not intended to be a thorough description of all the linguistic features of these languages. This lies both beyond the scope of this dissertation and would result in an extremely voluminous work. Instead, these overviews will focus particularly on a. salient linguistic features that distinguish the language at hand from the other languages discussed and b. particularly linguistic features that will be discussed in chapter 3. A concise bibliographical summary will be provided at the end of each section.

Secondly, a comparative overview of certain phonological and morphological elements will be attached at the end of the dissertation in the form of several appendices, which can be consulted for a quick, side-by-side view of the most relevant features discussed.

2.1. Shared typological features

All of the languages are Semitic languages. More specifically, they all belong to the West Semitic subgroup. The East Semitic languages, which will not be treated in much detail here, consist primarily of Akkadian and the poorly attested Eblaite. The West Semitic languages, therefor, represent all other known Semitic languages. West Semitic further split off into three distinct subbranches: Ethio-Semitic, Central Semitic, and Modern South Arabian.

The most important differences between West Semitic and Central Semitic is the presence of the non-geminate prefix conjugation **yaqtul(u)* marking the present, as well as the pharyngealized realization of the emphatic consonants (Hetzron 1998:8). The Central Semitic languages are subdivided into Northwest Semitic, including Aramaic, Canaanite (including Hebrew and Punic) and Ugaritic.⁹³ Both

⁹³ From the second century AD onwards, there is some evidence for Hebrew/Aramaic and Sabaic language contact, due to the spread of monotheism (see also above, 1.3.3 and below, 3.4.)

the Epigraphic South Arabian languages and Arabic are considered to have split off from Central Semitic.

Due to their shared ancestry, there are several features all South Arabia's languages have in common. The following subsection provides a brief overview of the most important shared features.

2.1.1. Emphatic consonants

The Semitic languages all possess certain consonants that Semitists describe as 'emphatic'. The reason for this term is that the pronunciation of these consonants differs between languages; they can be realized as glottalized, ejective, or pharyngealized, although it is likely that in Proto-Semitic these consonants were glottalized (Kogan 2011:59–60).⁹⁴

2.1.2. Word formation

All Semitic languages rely on a combination of certain roots in word formation. Typically, roots consist of three consonants, although biconsonantal roots and roots with four consonants (quadri-consonantal roots) are not unusual.⁹⁵ Although roots based on five consonants are not unknown, these tend to be restricted to the Ethio-Semitic languages. Nearly all consonantal roots can be combined with one another, with the sole exception that in triconsonantal roots, the first and second root consonant cannot be identical (Greenberg 1950; Vernet 2011).

These roots can be combined in different patterns to create new words. These patterns rely on a combination of affixes (prefixes, infixes, and suffixes) and the modification of vocal patterns. These patterns play a fundamental role in the morphological system of the Semitic languages, as they are used to mark nearly all verbal and nominal categories. Although these patterns are attested in all Semitic languages, the number of patterns used can vary between them.

2.1.3. Case

The Proto-Semitic singular noun is reconstructed as having three cases: nominative, accusative, and genitive, which are marked with **-u(m)*, **-a(m)*, and **-i(m)*, respectively. A smaller category of nouns only mark a nominative-oblique distinction, referred to as diptotic. i.e., *-u*; *-a*.

⁹⁴ The glottalized realization of emphatic consonants is attested in the Ethiopian Semitic languages, Modern South Arabian as well as in some South Arabian dialects of Arabic (Watson and Heselwood 2016).

⁹⁵ The presence of basic vocabulary consisting of only two roots in all Semitic languages has caused a problem for scholars attempting to analyze the Semitic languages through a triconsonantal lens. The theory that biconsonantal roots were present in (pre-)Proto-Semitic has been accepted since the middle of the 20th century (Lipinski 1997:207), although more recently Hecker (2007) argued that the morphology of Pre-Proto-Semitic was completely bi-radical.

For the dual and plural, only two cases are distinguished: nominative and oblique (Huehnergard 2019:165).

Both Ugaritic and Classical Arabic show that grammatical case was retained in distinct branches of Central Semitic. Furthermore, the retention of the accusative *-a* in Gəʕəz show that its retention should therefore also be reconstructed for proto-West-Semitic (Al-Jallad and Van Putten 2017).

2.1.4. Gender

All Semitic languages distinguish gender along a bipartite sex-based axis: masculine and feminine (Weninger 2011b:166). A typical feature of Semitic is the presence of gender polarity: this means that masculine nouns are counted with feminine numerals and vice versa. Secondly, gender is distinguished not just in the third person, but in the second person as well (Huehnergard 2019:61).

2.1.5. Number

Proto-Semitic possessed three numbers: singular, dual, and plural (Weninger 2011b:166). Although the dual is no longer productive everywhere, traces of the dual exist in practically all Semitic languages.⁹⁶ Number is a very salient category, as virtually all nouns and verbs are modified for number (Huehnergard 2019:59).

A notable feature of West Semitic languages is the presence of the so-called *broken* or *internal plural*. Briefly stated, there are two strategies to form plural nouns: either through the addition of suffixes, for example Arabic *qātil* > *qatilūn*, “killers”; Hebrew *meleḥ*, > *m(ə)leḥ-īm*, “kings”; or through the modification of internal patterns (e.g., Arabic *bayt* > *buyūt*, “houses”). Although the presence of internal plurals is reconstructed to Proto-Semitic, it is only attested in fossilized forms in East Semitic (Huehnergard 2019:59)

2.1.6. Pronouns

Pronouns are inflected for two genders (masculine and feminine) and three numbers (singular, dual, and plural).⁹⁷ For proto-Semitic, four types of pronouns are reconstructed: 1) personal, 2) demonstrative, 3) relative, and 4) interrogative and impersonal (Huehnergard 2011:53–55)

⁹⁶ For example, the dual was apparently already lost as a productive category in post-Old Akkadian (Lipinski 1997:237). The dual is productive in Ugaritic, Old Aramaic, Classical Arabic (and, as a nominal category, in some Arabic dialects), Modern South Arabian. A general overview of the dual can be found in (Lipinski 1997:236–38) For traces of the dual in the Arabic dialects, see Blanc (1970); for Classical Ethiopic, see Heide (2006).

⁹⁷ A possible exception to this is the 1st person dual pronoun, which is only attested in the Modern South Arabian Mehri language (see also 2.3). As a 1st person dual is not normally reconstructed for proto-Semitic, it is possible that this is a Mehri or (proto-)Modern South Arabian innovation.

Personal pronouns generally fall into two categories: independent personal pronouns, which, in proto-Semitic both came in the form of a nominative and oblique form (Weninger 2011b:168); and pronominal suffixes. When attached to verbs, the pronominal suffixes normally express object marking; when attached to nouns, they express pronominal possession.

In West Semitic, the proximal demonstrative marker **tV*: eventually developed into a relative marker (Huehnergard and Pat-El 2018:192–93). The West Semitic plural demonstrative is formed on a based *ʔVl*:, which itself probably developed out of a remote demonstrative pronoun (Huehnergard 2019:54). Based on the comparative evidence, it is normally assumed that the relative pronoun agreed with its syntactic antecedent in everything but state (Lipinski 1997:324).

2.1.7. State

Proto-Semitic formally distinguished between nouns occurring in the isolate state and the definite state.

Nouns in the definite state are either marked by a certain linguistic element (such as the definite article) or by their standing in construct with another noun (Gensler 2011:293). The construct state consists of two nouns, the head noun and the dependent. In the construct state, the head noun marks the possessed and the construct the possessor (e.g., Arabic *ṣāhib l-bayti*, “the owner of the house”). This order cannot be reversed, nor can any other lexical element be placed between the head noun and the dependent.

2.1.8. Negation

The simple negative particle **lā* can be reconstructed to proto-Semitic. Less certain is the position of the negators **ʔal* and **ay(y)*; the former is considered a West Semitic innovation by Faber (Faber 1998:8), whereas Weninger reconstructs it for Proto-Semitic and allows for the possibility that **ʔay(y)* is a secondary derivation of *ʔal* (Weninger 2011b:170). Reflexes of these negators are found in all languages attested in South Arabia.

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2.2. Late Sabaic

Late Sabaic is the term used to refer to a variety of the Sabaic language, in use from circa 200 to 550 AD. Late Sabaic differs from earlier varieties of Sabaic in several ways, which will be discussed in more detail lower in this section. Sabaic itself is one of the Epigraphic South Arabian languages, which are attested predominantly in Southwest Arabia between around 1100 BC onwards (Stein 2011:1042).⁹⁸ As these languages are exclusively attested through epigraphy, the term "Epigraphic South Arabian" is used throughout this dissertation.

Together with Sabaic, the Epigraphic South Arabian languages are generally divided into four distinct varieties: Minaic (or Madhabian),⁹⁹ Qatabanic, and Ḥaḍramitic, referring to the respective political entities which used these languages (Multhoff 2019:321). Of these languages, Sabaic is the most widely attested, which has around 6 000 deciphered and published inscriptions (Stein 2013:19). After Sabaic, the more widely attested Epigraphic South Arabian languages are Qatabanic, with about 2000 inscriptions, and Minaic with about

⁹⁸ Several other names have been and are used to refer to these languages, such as Old and Ancient South Arabian and Ṣayḥadic. This last term was introduced by Beeston and is, for example, used by Korotayev but has otherwise not found widespread usage.

⁹⁹ Several scholars, including Arbach (1993) and Robin (1996a:54–55), prefer the latter (fr. *madhābīen*), as the earliest texts of this linguistic variety predate the foundation of the state of Maʿīn and was used beyond its borders.

1500 inscriptions. The least amount of evidence exists for Ḥaḍramitic, for which 1500 inscriptions of generally relatively short length have so far been discovered (Stein 2011:1042).

Sabaic and the other Epigraphic South Arabia languages are considered to represent a branch of Central Semitic. The most important reason for this is the presence of the imperfect **yaqtul(u)*, which reflects a typical Central Semitic innovation as opposed to West Semitic **yuqattal* (Nebes 1994:75–7).¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, there are several shared phonological, morphological, syntactical, and lexical isoglosses between the Epigraphic South Arabian languages that set them apart from other Semitic languages (Avanzini 2009). These shall be discussed in some more detail below.

The internal relations between the Epigraphic South Arabian languages is not yet fully established. An earlier position that held the languages constituted a genetically closely affiliated group (Beeston 1962; Höfner 1943) has been gradually abandoned as more epigraphic material came to light. This material indicates that at least Sabaic and Minaic represented different strata from the very earliest period onwards (Multhoff 2019:321). The earliest Qatabanic and Ḥaḍramitic inscriptions indicate a more significant Sabaic cultural influence, although they too possess distinct grammatical features (Avanzini 2009:23–4).

Late Sabaic itself represents a distinct dialect of Sabaic that emerged after the Himyarites conquest of South Arabia in the 4th century AD. Following the end of Sabaean political hegemony in South Arabia towards the 3rd century BC, distinct regional varieties of Sabaic began to emerge. One of these varieties, Southern Middle Sabaic, also known as Radmanitic, developed in the Himyarite heartland. As this area had previously been under control of the kingdom of Qataban, the Southern Middle Sabaic inscriptions occasionally show a number of grammatical, syntactic and lexical ‘Qatabanisms’ (Multhoff 2019:322).

Following the Himyarites’ conquest of South Arabia, both Standard and Southern Middle Sabaic features emerged in Late Sabaic, which would serve as the linguistic standard across South Arabia up until the middle of the 6th century AD. After this time, the epigraphic record comes to an end (Stein 2003:5–6).

2.2.1. The study of Epigraphic South Arabian

The study of the Epigraphic South Arabian languages in Europe¹⁰¹ goes back to the beginning of the 19th century. Earlier references to South Arabian inscriptions

¹⁰⁰ Nebes demonstrated the presence of **yaqtulu* in Sabaic and it is assumed to have existed in the other South Arabian languages as well (but see contra Avanzini (2015:9)).

¹⁰¹ Although medieval Muslim scholars retained some degree of awareness of the pre-Islamic inscriptions of South Arabia, a serious attempt to systematically decipher and interpret the inscriptions was never undertaken (see also the discussion about the South Arabian script in medieval Islam, 4.4.)

do exist,¹⁰² but no European visitor had been able or willing to reproduce the ones they saw. The first copies of South Arabian inscriptions were sent to Germany in 1811, and, following the establishment of the Aden Protectorate in 1836 many more South Arabian inscriptions became available to western scholars.

The South Arabian script itself was re-deciphered (nearly) simultaneously by the German philologists Emil Rödiger and Wilhelm Gesenius, who both claimed to have been the first to do so.¹⁰³ Regardless, the script's decipherment functionally meant the founding of the field of South Arabian studies, which initially found particularly strong support at the Austrian Imperial Academy of Sciences (*Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften*) and at various scientific institutions in Paris. Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, much more South Arabian inscriptions would be discovered, deciphered and analyzed, particularly due to the activities of the scholars Eduard Glaser and Joseph Halévy (Lichtenstadter 1909; Reinach 1917).¹⁰⁴ The wealth of material Glaser and Halévy collected resulted in the publication of the first systematic grammars of Sabaic (Höfner 1943).¹⁰⁵

From the middle of the 20th century onwards, archaeological expeditions to South Arabia increased. Several were organized by western institutions, such as the German Archaeological Institute (*Deutsches Archäologisches Institut*), but important expeditions were also carried out by the General Organization of Antiquities and Museums in Yemen (GOAM), scholars from Cairo University and members of Egypt's Ministry of Education (Maraqten 2021:104–6).

Deciphering the South Arabian miniscule script took considerably more time, however. In 1972, Mahmoud al-Ghoul had come into the possession of wooden sticks incised with inscriptions similar to those of the monumental texts. Full decipherment of the miniscule script took much longer, as it was only by 1977 that al-Ghoul was able to offer a tentative translation of these inscriptions (Ryckmans 1993). The discovery and decipherment of the palm leaf sticks created a great impetus to the study of the South Arabian languages and their grammar, as well as offered new insights into their history (Stein, Jocham, and Marx 2016:264).

¹⁰² The Spanish Jesuit priest Pedro Paez, who was enslaved on the way to Ethiopia from Gao, noted that in Marib he saw “many stones with ancient letters that not even the local people knew how to read or explain” (Boavida, Pennec, and Ramos 2011:141)

¹⁰³ The controversy over who first deciphered the South Arabian script would lead to a rivalry between the two scholars, with Rödiger authoring a booklet pointing out the mistakes his former professor had made in his own work (Mittwoch 1935:346; Rödiger 1841).

¹⁰⁴ Glaser took squeezes of nearly a thousand South Arabian inscriptions, collected numerous Arabic manuscripts, and made notes of local customs and traditions. Halévy collected nearly 700 inscriptions, mostly with the assistance of Hayyim Ḥabšūš, a local Yemeni Jewish copper-smith. Despite the immense aid he provided to Halévy, the latter failed to mention him in any of his publications.

¹⁰⁵ See also Lochner von Hüttenbach (2003) and Müller (1993).

2.2.2. Orthography

As far as we know, Late Sabaic texts are exclusively written in the South Arabian script.¹⁰⁶ The South Arabian script possesses 29 consonants and thus represents the full consonant inventory of proto-Semitic. As was the case with many other ancient Semitic writing systems, a separate, consistent system of writing vowels did not develop within the South Arabian orthographic tradition (Multhoff 2019: 324).

Occasionally, the glyphs for the semivowels <w> and <y> are used to represent long vowels, although apparently exclusively in word-final position. The attestation of third person plural verbs followed by pronominal suffixes suggests that long vowels were not written word-internally, e.g.:

Table 1: The representation of long vowels in Sabaic

Sabaic	Tentative vocalization	Translation
<i>hqs²bw</i>	* <i>haqšabū</i>	“They renovated”
<i>hqs²b-hw</i> ¹⁰⁷	* <i>haqšabū-hū</i>	“They renovated it”
<i>byt-hmw</i>	* <i>baytu-humū</i>	“Your [pl.] house”
<i>whb-hm-hw</i>	* <i>wahab-humū-hū</i>	“They gifted it to you [pl.]”

2.2.3. Phonology

Due to the limitations of the South Arabian script mentioned above, the understanding of Sabaic phonology remains limited. Regardless, there are several clues that allow for a partial reconstruction. Firstly, the size of the Sabaic corpus allows for greater diachronic analysis; secondly, Sabaic words are occasionally attested in Greek and Latin works.¹⁰⁸

2.2.3.1. Vowels

It is usually assumed that Sabaic distinguished at least three different short vowels /a/, i, and /u/, corresponding with the proto-Semitic vowel system. It appears that short and long vowels were contrasted as well (Stein 2003:41)¹⁰⁹ Both internal

¹⁰⁶ The only exception I am aware of are the fragmentary South Arabian inscriptions transcribed by al-Hamdānī in the Arabic script, discussed in more detail below (4.4.).

¹⁰⁷ For an example of *hqs²bw* and *hqs²b-hmw* occurring in the same text, see RES 5085:4-6 (translation DASI): *ʔlht Yzʔn w-Yl(ǧb) w-d-Kbrn w-Ḥysʔ(y)n w-šdqyn w-d-Yšbr hqs²bw w-grb ǧl-hmw b-sʔr ʕmqn l-ʔrd-hmw Ḥyfn w-hqs²b-hw h*, “those of Yzʔn, Ylǧb, d-Kbrn, Ḥysʔyn, šdqyn and d-Yšbr brought into cultivation and laid out their fields (irrigated) in terraces in the wādī ʕmqn to their land Ḥyfn and brought it into cultivation”

¹⁰⁸ That being said, it cannot necessarily be assumed that the phonological system of Sabaic can be extended to the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages as well. In fact, there are several ways in which the other languages display variations in their phonological system (cf.

¹⁰⁹ Indirect evidence for this occurs in the Greek transcription of some South Arabian personal names, where the theophoric element <ʔl> is consistently spelled with Greek η (i.e., /ē/) Similarly, the presence of South Arabian theophoric personal name in Arabic papyri as well as in the literary tradition suggests this vowel was long.

diachronic variation as well as Greek and Syriac sources suggest that the (short) vowels *e* and *o* may have possibly existed (Koutchoukali 2021).

The attestation of terms originally containing a diphthong being spelled without the semivowel *y* or *w* from post-early-Sabaic period onwards might indicate the original diphthongs became monophthongs, possibly reflecting a movement */ay/ > /ē; *aw > /ō/ (Stein 2003). Furthermore, the transcription of some South Arabian personal and place names in Greek in the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea and the Harran inscription, as well as in Syriac in the Book of the Himyarites, strongly suggests the existence of the vowels *e* and *o*.¹¹⁰

2.2.3.2. Consonants

The epigraphic material suggests that that the Epigraphic South Arabian languages in their earliest period maintained nearly all consonants of proto-Semitic (Stein 2011:1042).¹¹¹ In this regard, Sabaic appears to have been the most conservative.

The most notable phonological change, namely the merger of the sibilants *s*¹ and *s*³ can only be established with certainty for the Late Sabaic period (Sima 2001; Multhoff 2019:325).

The limitations of the South Arabian script also mean that our understanding of Sabaic phonotactics is very poorly known. Stein (2003:45–46) compares the forms like *s'm* and *tny* to Arabic *ism* and *itnān(i)*, suggesting the presence un-written prosthetic vowel, while also noting the existence of Hebrew *šem* and (plural) *šəṇayim*. An additional piece of evidence that the Epigraphic South Arabian languages may not have allowed for initial consonant clusters is the Minaic transcription of the Greek name *Ptolemaios* as *Thmyt* (Beeston 2005a).

2.2.3.3. Metathesis

A particular feature of Late Sabaic as compared to Early and Middle Standard Sabaic is the occasional metathesis of the first two consonants in certain nouns whose first radical is *w*. Examples include *ʔlwd* < *ʔwld*, “children” and *ʔywn* < *ʔwyn*, “vineyards” (Stein 2003:35–36).

This feature is also attested in Southern Middle Sabaic and in Qatabanic, as well as sporadically in Ḥaḍramitic. Consequently, it is normally seen as an example of Qatabanic substrate influence (Stein 2003:36). Outside Epigraphic South Arabian, similar metathesis of the semivowel *w* is occasionally attested in Tigrinya and Amharic (Leslau 1995:28).

¹¹⁰ The relative paucity of the non-Sabaic material means that the vocalic system of the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages is much less clear. The presence of the non-etymological *h* in Minaic, Qatabanic, and Hadramitic has been explained as a possible mater lectionis, representing the vowel /ā/. In Minaic, -h is also used to mark the construct state on singular nouns, and possibly denotes some kind of vowel there, too (Stein 2011:1049–1050).

¹¹¹ The most divergent of these seems to be Ḥaḍramitic, which from its first attestations onwards already appears to have merged *t* and *s*³. Ḥaḍramitic further seems to occasionally merge the interdental *d* with the sibilant *z* (Stein 2011:1047–48)

2.2.4. Morphology

Word formation in the Epigraphic South Arabian languages share with the other Semitic languages a system of the combination of certain root consonants. Most of these roots consist of three consonants, although certain biradical roots (e.g., *ʔb*, “father;” *ʔh*, “brother”) and quadri-consonantal roots are also attested (e.g., *kwkb*, “star;” *s²ml*, “left, north”). As in other Semitic languages, different affixes are used to create verbal nouns, abstracts, participles, and other derived forms (Stein 2011: 1050).

2.2.4.1. Gender

Verbs, nouns, pronouns, and adjectives are marked for gender. Like other Semitic languages, Epigraphic South Arabian gender is usually considered to sex-based and bipartite, i.e., masculine-feminine.¹¹² Grammatically masculine nouns are usually unmarked whereas most feminine nouns are marked with the suffix -t (e.g., *šlm*, “[male] statuette” vs *šlmt* “female statuette”) (Multhoff 2019:328–29).

A small class of feminine nouns and adjectives are unmarked, particularly those that have a natural feminine referent (e.g., *ʔm*, “mother;” *hyd* “menstruating”). In a few cases, a noun’s feminine gender can only be established on the basis of agreement (e.g., *nfs^l*, “soul;” *b^rr*, “well”), and so on. Like most other Semitic languages, body parts, especially those occurring in pairs tend to be feminine in gender (Stein 2003:67–71).

2.2.4.2. Number

Number is marked on verbs, nouns, pronouns, and adjectives. There are three numbers: singular, dual, and plural (Multhoff 2019:329). All numbers seem to have been basically productive throughout the entirety of the South Arabian written tradition (Stein 2003:71)

Plural marking on the noun can occur in two forms: through external (or sound) plurals, which involves the addition of a suffix to the noun. However, the vastly more common form of marking plurality on the noun is through internal (or broken) plurals, which is done by combining certain affixes with the noun’s root consonants root consonants of a noun (see also the discussion on roots, above) (Stein 2011:1050)

¹¹² Stein notes the appearance of the feminine demonstrative pronouns *dt* and *ʔt* in front of grammatically masculine nouns, e.g., *rt^{dw} dt ʔs^ttrn w-nkyln ʔtr s²rqn bn mhb^sʔm* (YMN 6), “They entrusted these writings and labors to ʔTTR S²RQN against one who may do harm”; *ywm hwfy-hw ʔlmqh dt tnb²-hw*, “the day ʔIlmuquh gave him what he had promised”; *ʔt hfⁿ krb²l wtr bn qmr^ly krb s^lb² b-mlk-hw l-ʔlmqh w-l s^lb²*, “Those has given over Karib²l Watar son of Damar ʔAlī during his reign, to Ilmuquh and to Saba.” In the case of the first, it seems possible that the use of the singular feminine demonstrative pronoun reflects the coalescence of the inanimate plural and the singular feminine, as in Classical Arabic. In the case of the second, it is not impossible that the usage of *dt* simply reflects a partial loss of gender. In his analysis of gender loss in northwestern Latvian dialects, Endzēlīns argues that demonstrative pronouns tend to lose gender agreement first (Walchli 2017).

Finally, a category of collective nouns exist which morphologically are like singular nouns but behave syntactically as plurals. Examples of such nouns include *wld*, “children”; *bqr*, “cattle”; *tmr*, “dates” (Stein 2003:66).

2.2.4.3. Pronouns

As with the noun, personal pronouns can stand in singular, dual, and plural and can occur either as independent pronouns or as enclitics. Due to the nature of the corpus, not all independent pronouns are attested (adapted from Stein, 2003):¹¹³

Table 2: Sabaic independent and enclitic personal pronouns

	SG.	DL.	PL.	SG.	DL	PL
1	<i>ʔn</i>	–	<i>*nʔn</i> (?) ¹¹⁴	-y (gen) -n [acc]	–	(-n)
2. M	<i>ʔnt; ʔt</i>	<i>*ʔntmy; *ʔtmy</i>	<i>ʔntmw; *ʔtmw</i>	-k	-kmy	-kmw
F	<i>*ʔnt; *ʔt</i>	<i>*ʔntmy; ʔtmy</i>		-k	-kmy	
3.M	<i>hʔ; hwʔ</i>	<i>hmy</i>	<i>hmw</i>		-hmy	-hmw
F.	<i>hʔ; *hyʔ</i>	<i>*hmy</i>	<i>*hn</i>	-hw (-h) -h, -hw	-hmy	-hn

There are two kinds of demonstrative pronouns: proximal and distal. Both the proximal and distal demonstrative pronouns are inflected for gender and number.¹¹⁵ As a rule, the demonstrative pronoun is placed before the noun (e.g., *ḡn msʔndn*, “this inscription,” *ʔln ʔbʔln*, “these owners”). The feminine forms *ḡt* and *ʔlt* are occasionally attested as an anaphoric neuter, i.e., “this; these [things]” (Stein 2003:138–44).

During the Early and Middle Sabaic periods (i.e., 800 BC – 300 AD), the relative pronoun is inflected for number and gender (see table 3 below), and, in Early Sabaic, seemingly for case as well.¹¹⁶ By the Late Sabaic period the invariable relative pronoun *ḡ-* is attested as a biform (Stein 2003:150)

It is important to note that through the history of Sabaic several important grammatical changes occurred. From the Middle Sabaic period onwards, the feminine singular relative pronoun is attested particular in the southern Sabaic

¹¹³ For example, while the existence of the first-person plural is assumed, the corresponding independent personal pronoun has not been attested. Due to the lack of vocalization, it is always not entirely clear whether the enclitic pronoun -n should be read as a singular or as a plural.

¹¹⁴ The independent form of the first-person plural is unattested in Sabaic but has been found in the Minaic inscription L53 (Weimar 2021). It is plausible that the Minaic form and the Sabaic were identical, or at least similar.

¹¹⁵ Albeit in the dual so far only the masculine form *ḡyn* has been attested (Stein 2003:139–40)

¹¹⁶ There are some attestations of a distinction in early Sabaic between *ḡw* and *ḡy* (e.g., Ja 2870: [...] *bn ḡy yfrq-hw b-(qt) w-hw*), ‘from the one who would frighten him’, which could plausibly suggest an original nominative-oblique distinction, i.e., **ḡū ~ *ḡī* (Stein 2003:145)

dialects and becomes more widespread from the Late Sabaic period onwards (Stein 2003:146). Similarly, the masculine plural *ʔlw* (nominative) and *ʔly* (oblique) tend to be replaced by the form *ʔlht* in the Late Sabaic period as well, occurring with both masculine and feminine antecedents (Stein 2003:149). This relative pronoun, too, appears in some Middle Sabaic inscriptions from the southeast, starting with the Late Sabaic period.

Table 3: Sabaic relative pronouns

	SG.	DL.	PL.
M	<i>d-</i>	<i>dy</i>	<i>ʔlw</i> (NOM.) <i>ʔly</i> (OBL.)
	–	–	<i>ʔlht</i> (CG.)
F	<i>dt- /t-</i>	<i>dty</i>	<i>ʔlht</i>

2.2.4.4. Nominal morphology

Nouns are marked for (1) case, (2) state, (3) number, and (4) gender.

Case can be established with relative certainty for Sabaic, although its existence in the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages is less clear.¹¹⁷ The most important evidence for grammatical case is the distinction between the nominative and oblique in the masculine plural construct state, exemplified by nominative *bnw* versus oblique *bny*, vocalized as **banū ~ banī* (Stein 2011:1052).

Furthermore, the Epigraphic South Arabian languages possesses four different states. These are, respectively, the indeterminate, determinate, construct, and absolute states (Stein 2011:1051):

- a. The indeterminate state marks indefinite nouns and functions similarly to the *tanwīn* of Classical Arabic, e.g., *šlm-m*, ‘a statue.’
- b. The determinate state marks definite nouns, which are predominantly marked by the suffixed definite article. This can either have the form *-n* when following a singular noun (e.g., *šlm-n*, ‘the statue’) or an internal plural noun (e.g., *ʔšlm-n*, ‘the statues’) *-hn*, when following a noun in the dual (e.g. *šlm-n-hn*, ‘the two statues) or a noun with an external plural (*šlm-n-hn*, ‘the statues’).
- c. The construct state is used to indicate a possessive relationship; in this case, the first member of the construct state is always unmarked. Usually, a noun in the construct state is connected to another noun or pronominal suffix, but it can also be connected to a relative clause (Stein 2003:82–83)

¹¹⁷ Direct evidence for case outside Sabaic is less strong; Qatabanic appears to have had a similar case system to that of Sabaic, but the situation in Ḥadramitic and Minaic is much less well-known, partially due to the smaller number of inscriptions in these languages (Multhoff 2019)

- d. The absolute state is outwardly identical to the construct state, but is only attested in specific contexts, particularly with numerals used as determiners (e.g., *ʔrbʕt šlmm*, ‘four statues’) or with adverbial nouns (e.g., *l-ʔhr*, ‘forever’) (Stein 2003:86)

Table 4: Sabaic state based on the noun *šlm*, “statue” (adapted from (Multhoff 2019:329))

		indeterminate	determinate	construct/absolute
SG.	M.	<i>šlm-m</i>	<i>šlm-n</i>	<i>šlm</i>
	F.	<i>šlm-tm</i>	<i>šlm-tn</i>	<i>šlm-t</i>
DL.	M.	<i>šlm-n</i>	<i>šlm-nhn</i>	<i>šlm(y)</i> (NOM) <i>šlm-y</i> (OBL)
	F.	<i>šlm-tn</i>	<i>šlm-tnhn</i>	<i>šlm-[t]</i> , <i>šlm-ty</i>
PL.	M.	<i>šlm-n</i> <i>ʔšlm-m</i>	<i>šlm-nhn</i> <i>ʔšlm-n</i>	<i>šlm-w</i> (NOM) <i>šlm-y</i> (OBL)
	F.	<i>šlm-tm</i>	<i>šlm-tn</i>	<i>šlm-t</i> <i>ʔšlm</i>

2.2.4.5. Verbal morphology

The verb is marked for both gender and number and can occur with either a suffix- or prefix-conjugation. The former predominantly expresses anteriority whereas the latter expresses events occurring simultaneously with or posterior to a relative moment.

Table 5: The Sabaic G-stem suffix conjugation (adapted from Stein 2011:1060)

	SG.	DL	PL.
3 M.	<i>fʕl</i>	<i>fʕl-y</i>	<i>fʕl-w</i>
F.	<i>fʕl-t</i>	<i>fʕl-ty/-tw</i>	<i>fʕl-[n]y fʕl-tw</i>
2 M.	<i>fʕl-k</i>	<i>fʕl-kmy</i>	<i>fʕl-kmw</i>
F.	<i>fʕl-k</i>		–
1	<i>fʕl-k</i>		<i>fʕl-n</i>

The pattern of the prefix-conjugation appears to have been **yaqtulu*. Nebes (1994:60–1) was able to determine this by investigating the pattern of weak second radical verbs, such as the verb *kwn*, “to be”). In the G-stem, such verbs consistently follow the pattern *y-kn(-n)*. This would preclude a pattern **yaqattal*, found in Ethiopic and Modern South Arabian, as in such cases the expected form would be **y-kwn(n)*. Instead, the form *y-kn(-n)* points towards a pattern **yakūnu(nna(?))*, as in the Central Semitic languages.

Table 6: The Sabaic G-stem prefix conjugation, short and long forms (adapted from Stein 2011:1060)

	SG		DL		PL	
3.M. F.	<i>y-fʿl</i> <i>t-fʿl</i>	<i>y-fʿl-n</i> <i>t-fʿl-n</i>	<i>y-fʿl-y</i> <i>y-fʿl-n; t-fʿl-n</i>	<i>y-fʿl-nn</i> <i>t-fʿl-nn</i>	<i>y-fʿl-w</i> <i>y-fʿl-n</i>	<i>y-fʿl-nn</i> [<i>y-fʿl-nn</i>]; <i>t-fʿl-nn</i>
2. M. F.	<i>t-fʿl</i> [?]	<i>t-fʿl-n</i> <i>t-fʿl-n</i>	[?] [?]	<i>t-fʿl-nn</i> <i>t-fʿl-nn</i>	[?] [?]	<i>t-fʿl-nn</i> [?]
1.	[ʔ-fʿl]	[ʔ-fʿl-n]	[?]		[n-fʿl]	[?]

The Sabaic prefix conjugation is further characterized by the distinction between a short and a long indicative, marked by a suffixed -n. It is not entirely clear whether there is a semantic difference between the long and short indicative. Furthermore, Sabaic possesses several derived verbal stems that carry a range of semantic meanings (see table 7) (Stein 2011:1058–59).

Table 7: Sabaic derived stems

	Form	Meaning	Example	Translation
G	–	Basic meaning	<i>qtl</i> (* <i>qatala</i>)	–
D	– ¹¹⁸	Factitive; causative	<i>mlʔ</i> (* <i>mallaʔa</i>)	“to fill”
C	<i>h</i> - ¹¹⁹	Causative	<i>hqny</i> (* <i>haqniya</i>)	“to dedicate”
Gt	<i>-t-</i>	Reflexive-reciprocal or passive of the G-stem	<i>htmy</i> (* <i>(i)htamaya</i>) <i>qtbr</i> (* <i>(i)qtabara</i>)	“to protect oneself” “to be buried”
T	<i>t-</i>	Reflexive-reciprocal of the D-stem	<i>tšry</i> (* <i>tašarraya</i>)	“to ask for protection”
St	<i>st-</i>	Reflexive-reciprocal of the C-stem	<i>štdrʿ</i> (* <i>(i)šadraʿa</i>)	“to humble oneself”

It must be noted that the semantics of the different derived stems do not always fall clearly in the categories described in the table above. In some cases, the G-stem and the H-stem are semantically indistinguishable e.g., *mlʔ* ~ *hmlʔ* “to be full; to be filled” (Stein 2003:157)

The internal passive **qutila* ~ **yuqtal* is also reconstructed for Sabaic, although it is not orthographically indicated (Multhoff 2019:334) and must be determined by syntactical context Compare the following examples (Stein 2003:164–65):

¹¹⁸ Although orthographically not represented, it is assumed that the second root radical is geminated, e.g., *mlʔ* (**maliʔa*[ʔ]) “to be full” and *mlʔ* (**mallaʔa*), “to fill”.

¹¹⁹ In the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages, the characteristic consonant is *s*^l-, as with the personal pronouns.

CIH 19:7 (Central Middle Sabaic):

l-wfy *ḡlm* *wldt-hw* *mgdlt* *ḡt s'my'm*
to-protection.CST boy.CST birthed.ACT-3.F.SG-3.M.SG Mgdlt of Smy'm
“For the protection of the boy to whom Mgdlt of Smy'm gave birth (...)”

Ja 669:8-10 (Central Middle Sabaic):

l-qbly *ḡ-wld* *l-hmw* *bnm* *ḡkrm*
because CONJ-to.be.born.3.M.SG to-them child.INDET male.INDET
“Because a male child was born to them (...)”

2.2.5. Syntax

2.2.5.1. Word order

The most common word order in Sabaic is verb-subject-object. However, in the highly formulaic dedicatory inscriptions usually the subject is mentioned first.¹²⁰ A typically Sabaic features, also attested in the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages, is the usage of the so-called infinitive chain. In this case, a finite verb (i.e., one occurring in the suffix conjugation) can be followed by any number of infinitives that are coordinated with the conjunction *w-* (Multhoff 2019:335-36).

2.2.5.2. Agreement

Sabaic pronouns, adjectives, verbs tend to require full agreement with the noun in gender, number, state, and case. A special case is that of collective nouns, which, although morphologically unmarked, tend to take plural agreement (Multhoff 2019:336).

In Late Sabaic, the relative pronoun loses case and gender distinction. Evidence for the synchronic usage of both the inflected and uninflected relative pronoun goes back as far as the Middle Sabaic period (c. 300 BC – 300 AD), with the uninflected form *ḡ-* becoming much more common in Late Sabaic (Multhoff 2019:328).

Furthermore, some Late Sabaic inscriptions show the usage of the ‘royal plural.’ In such cases, the singular subject (i.e., the king) takes third person plural agreement. The earliest example of such a grammatical construction occurs in the inscription Gar Sharahbil A, which dates to 462 AD (Stein 2003:167):

Gar Sharahbil A:1,3

[*S²r*] *hb'l Y'fir* *mlk* *s'b[?]* (...) *br[?]w* (...)
S²rḥb'l Y'fir king.CON Saba[?] (...) built.M.3.PL (...)
“Šurahbi'l Yu'fir, king of Saba[?] built and laid the foundations (...)”

¹²⁰ For example, CIAS 39.11/o 9 n° 1: *Rtdm bn [H]ḡwm maqtwy bn Yh'n hqny 'lmqhw b'l 'wm slmn*, “Rtdm, son of Ḥḡwm *maqtauwī* of [the tribe] Yh'n dedicated to 'Ilmūquh, Lord of 'Awwām, the statue”.

2.2.5.3. Nominal modification

In Sabaic, the relative pronoun *ḡ*- can be used as a genitive exponent, which is used to modify both nouns as well as relative clauses. A relatively common construction to state “a bronze statue” is, as follows:

<i>ṣlmn-n</i>	<i>ḡ-dhb-n</i>
statue-DEF	GEN-bronze-DEF.

2.2.5.4. Negation

The most common negator in Sabaic is the particle *ʔ*, which is used for both nominal and verbal negations. In the case of verbal negation, it is used with both the suffix- and prefix-conjugations. In Late Sabaic, a distinct negator *dʔ* is also attested (Stein 2011:1063).

2.2.6. Lexicon

Although this is not the place for in-depth discussion of the Sabaic lexicon, a brief overview is given here.

Firstly, much of the Late Sabaic lexicon consists of inherited lexemes from Proto- and Central Semitic. Within Epigraphic South Arabian, considerable variation can be found between the languages themselves, with Ḥaḍramitic (despite its poor attestation) standing out due to the relatively high number of *hapax legomena* (Prioletta 2014). A number of these can be plausibly attributed to contact with (proto-)Modern South Arabian speakers (Huehnergard 2002:127). Similarly, the Sabaic inscriptions from the northern parts of the South Arabian cultural area generally contain terminology not found in the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages, but with parallels in Safaitic and (Classical) Arabic (Stein 2007:26–7).

From the Middle Sabaic period onwards, concurrent with the intensification of relations with the eastern Mediterranean Greek and Aramaic loanwords become more common. From the 3rd century onwards, both *Gəʕəz* (through contact with Aksum) and Hebrew loanwords, especially following the Ḥimyarites’ conversion to Judaism, are also attested (Beeston 1994). The position of loanwords in Sabaic is discussed in more detail in the section on language contact below (3.4.).

That Sabaic and other pre-Islamic South Arabian languages influenced dialects of Yemeni Arabic is attested both through modern dialectological research as well as by comments from medieval Arabic lexicographers and travelers.¹²¹

¹²¹ For an overview of the thematic range of Sabaic loanwords in contemporary Yemeni Arabic dialects, see (Müller 2014). The presence of South Arabian words (both attested in the pre-Islamic epigraphy and in modern Yemeni Arabic) in the works of the medieval scholars al-Hamdānī and Naṣwān al-Ḥimyarī was the subject of a thorough study by Al-Selwi (1987).

2.2.7. Epigraphic South Arabian: internal relations

The internal genetic affiliation of the different Epigraphic South Arabian languages is not yet entirely solved. The general consensus has gradually shifted from considering the Epigraphic South Arabian varieties as dialects towards a more complex view, in which Sabaic is regarded as comparatively more innovative and the non-Sabaic languages as more conservative (Avanzini 2015).¹²² The relationship between Sabaic and the other South Arabian languages is relatively complex, however.

On linguistic grounds it seems that the non-Sabaic South Arabian languages represent a more conservative Semitic stratum. A common example provided for this is the form of the personal pronouns and the causative stem: in Sabaic, these are marked with *h-*, whereas in the non-Sabaic South Arabian languages retain the proto-Semitic sibilant *s*⁻¹ (Stein 2011:1056) (Multhoff 2019:327–28).¹²³

	Demonstrative	Causative
Sabaic	<i>hw²</i>	<i>hqny</i>
Qatabanic	<i>s¹(w)</i>	<i>sqny</i>

Based on the relatively more innovative phonology of Sabaic, it seems plausible that before its first attestation, the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages were already spoken in the region. Archaeological evidence may support this assumption. There is evidence that sites in eastern South Arabia were continuously settled during throughout Bronze and Iron Ages and into the early historic period without signs of social upheaval (Edens and Wilkinson 1998:93–102). Further complicating our understanding of the earliest historical period in South Arabia is the presence of pottery sherds with South Arabian letters attested in the same area before the foundation of the Sabaeen state (see also 1.1.2).¹²⁴

However, whereas the South Arabian script had seemingly been introduced to the region before the advent of the Sabaeen state, there is no evidence of its usage in political contexts. The Sabaeen rulers were apparently the first in the region to use the South Arabian script to legitimize their dominance. This political and cultural dominance is likely what led the other South Arabian states to adopt the South Arabian script for political purposes as well, taking over from the Sabaeans the tradition of erecting monuments and writing inscriptions on them. The linguistic evidence, too, points towards Sabaeen cultural dominance in the region,

¹²² As the vast majority of epigraphic material available is attested in Sabaic, its overrepresentation is what led to its perception of being the “standard” South Arabian language. See for example Beeston’s original *Descriptive Grammar of Epigraphic South Arabian* (1962) and the revised version, his *Sabaic Grammar* (1984), as well as the author’s comments in the latter.

¹²³ For example, compare the Sabaic form *hqny*, “he dedicated” versus non-Sabaic *s¹qny*.

¹²⁴ Pottery sherds with painted letters have been discovered at the site of Ḥajar bin Humeid. Although dating the age of these sherds is difficult, this pottery was almost certainly produced in the pre-historic period (Beek 1969:16, 98–99).

as the presence of “Sabaicisms” in non-Sabaic South Arabian languages indicates (Avanzini 2015).

The Epigraphic South Arabian languages also display some lexical variations. In Early Sabaic the conjunction “when” occurs as *ywm* (Early Sabaic), which is replaced with (*b-*)*kn-/k-* in the post-Early Sabaic period. Although *ywm* is also attested in non-Sabaic ESA, the more common conjunction is *nty* in Minaic and Qatabanic, and *mt* in Ḥaḍramitic. The form *ywm* reflects a grammaticalization of the noun (i.e., “day”), whereas the particle *mt[y]* found in the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages appears to be a proto-Semitic retention (Lipinski 1997: 458–59).

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2.3. Modern South Arabian

This section briefly introduces the Modern South Arabian languages, a group of related, languages spoken in western Oman, eastern Yemen and on the island of Socotra. Modern South Arabian is generally divided into six varieties: Mehri, Shehret,¹²⁵ Soqotri, Hobyot, Harsusi, and Baṭhari. Without the exception of Mehri and Soqotri, which have between 100 000 to 150 000 and around 50 000 speakers, respectively, the Modern South Arabian languages are endangered.¹²⁶

Despite their name, Modern South Arabian is no longer considered to descend directly from any of the Epigraphic South Arabian languages. The term instead refers to the fact that an awareness of these languages' existence only emerged in the 19th century. The first tentative descriptions of Modern South Arabian languages appeared in the first half of the 19th century (Wellsted 1835) More thorough studies of various Modern South Arabian languages, particularly Mehri, Shehret and Soqotri followed in the 20th century (Johnstone 1977, 1981; Johnstone and Smith 1987; Wagner 1953). More recently, the Modern South Arabian languages have received renewed scholarly attention (Nakano and Ratcliffe 2013; Rubin 2018; Simeone-Senelle 2011; Watson 2014).

As Kogan notes, there are relatively few features shared by all Modern South Arabian languages that can be confidently reconstructed for Proto-MSA (Kogan 2015:467). The difficulty of finding pan-MSA isoglosses was already pointed out by Steiner (Steiner 1977:13), who only noted a single phonological feature. More recently, the work of Simeone-Senelle (Simeone-Senelle 2015), Bendjaballah and Ségéral (2017) and particularly Dufour (Al Kathiri and Dufour 2020; Dufour 2017, 2021) have done much to improve our understanding of the internal relations and linguistic history of Modern South Arabian.

2.3.1. Pre-modern evidence for Modern South Arabian

Apart from the linguistic features mentioned above, there are some (in)direct indications of speakers of Modern South Arabian predating systematic study of the languages themselves. The Hadramitic inscriptions, for example, contain some features that are not found in any of the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages, but which have parallels in Modern South Arabian. This includes the preposition *ʔd*, “up to” (compare Shehret *ʔéd/ed*, “up to”; Harsusi *wedé*, “to; towards”) as well as the preposition *h-*, “to” (Mehri *he-*, “to; towards”; Shehret *her*) (Huehnergard 2002:; Kogan 2015:556)

¹²⁵ The terms Shehret and Jibbali are both used, with the latter being less preferred by most native speakers (Watson and al-Mahri: personal communication).

¹²⁶ As a result, Mehri and Soqotri are generally the best-described Modern South Arabian languages (Simeone-Senelle and Lonnet 1997), (Simeone-Senelle 2011) (Janet C. E. Watson 2014), (Rubin 2018).

Furthermore, some epigraphic texts refer to speakers of Modern South Arabian.¹²⁷ a short Hadramitic inscription (Ja 954/RES 4877) mentions *S²hr*, chief of the Mahra (*S²hr kbr [?]mhrn*). Furthermore, two Sabaic inscriptions (Mafray-al-Mi^ssal 4; MAFYS-Ḍura^x 3) postdating the Ḥimyarites' conquest of Ḥaḍramawt mention the Mahra (*Mhrt*), as allies against the Ḥaḍramawt (Hatke 2019:30–32).¹²⁸ The presence of pre-Islamic inscriptions from regions mostly inhabited by speakers of Modern South Arabian languages suggest a long-standing presence, although these inscriptions have thus far not been deciphered (Le Quellec et al. 2018).

Medieval Muslim scholars were aware of the differences between Modern South Arabian and Arabic. The 10th century scholar al-Ḥamdānī says about the Mahra that “they are incomprehensible, resembling foreigners” (*mahratu ġutmun yuṣākilūna l-^ʿaġām*) (al-Ḥamdānī 1974:299). Two centuries later, the scholar Ibn al-Muġāwir corroborated this, stating that ‘the Mahra have a language to themselves nobody else understand’ (*la-hum luġatun min-hum wa-^ʿfi-him wa-lam ya^ʿfham-hā ^ʿilla hum*). Lack of mutual intelligibility likely also led to negative stereotyping, as Ibn al-Muġāwir calls the Mahra “sorcerers, known for their unbelief, intelligence, and a bit of madness” (1996:299).¹²⁹ However, beyond these brief comments medieval Arabic scholars did not seem to pay the Modern South Arabian languages particular attention.

2.3.2. Phonology

Because the Modern South Arabian languages as they are spoken today display a good degree of variety and internal divergence, it is difficult to make assertions that would apply for all languages. It can be stated that in terms of phonology, Modern South Arabian represents certain very conservative features while also displaying a strong degree of innovation in other features.

Dufour (2021:65) reconstructs five phonemic vowels for proto-MSA: *i, *e, *ø, *o, and *ε, with different realizations in the Modern South Arabian languages.

¹²⁷ Recently Hatke made a thorough study of the references to Modern South Arabian speakers in the South Arabian epigraphic corpora (Hatke 2019). Hatke notes that while contact between the pre-Islamic South Arabian kingdoms and Modern South Arabian speakers was relatively uncommon in the earliest period, from the turn of the millennium onwards, references increase with the conquest of South Arabia by the Ḥimyarites (Hatke 2019:50)

¹²⁸ Respectively *w-d-hnsr-hmw d-bn s²bn Mhrt*, “and those who had helped them, those from the tribe of Mhrt” (MAFRAY-al-Mi^ssal 4:4); MAFYS-Ḍura[?]; *ʿqwl s²b-hmw Ḍyftn w-Rḥm w-Mhrt*, “the princes of their tribes: Ḍyftn, Ḍyftn and Rḥm and Mhrt”

¹²⁹ *wa-ḥadaṭanī aḥmadu bnu ʿalī bni ʿabdallāhi l-wāsiṭīyyu qāla ^ʿinna ^ʿaṣla l-mahrati min baqīyyati qawmi ʿādin fa-lamma ʿahlaka llāhu tilka l-^ʿumama naġā hā^ʿulā^ʿi l-qawmu fa-sakanu ġībāla za^ʿfāri wa-ġazīrata suqūtrā wa-ġazīrati l-maṣīrati wa-hum qawmun ṭuwāhun ḥusānun la-hum luġatun min-hum wa-^ʿfi-him wa-lam ya^ʿfham-hā ^ʿilla hum wa-yusammūna-hum l-siḥrata wa-mā ṣtaqqa ismu l-siḥrati ^ʿillā mina l-siḥri li-^ʿannā ^ʿfi-him l-ġahlu wa-l-^ʿaqlu wa-mina l-maġnūni ya^ʿkulūna ni^ʿma llāhi Mbilā ḥamda wa-lā šukrin wa-ya^ʿbudūna ġayra-hā*

This is a notable expansion from the Proto-Semitic system, which only possessed three vowels.¹³⁰

In terms of consonants, MSA displays a great deal of internal divergence. For example, Mehri and Ḥarsuṣi display the elision of the voiced pharyngeal fricative ʕ, where it is retained in the other MSA languages (Castagna 2018:70–72; Simeone-Senelle 2011).

At the same time, the distinction of the three Proto-Semitic sibilants s^1 , s^2 and s^3 is retained, although their realization too differs in the different MSA languages. Of these, proto-Semitic s^1 has undergone the most significant changes, with two major outcomes, i.e., s and h . The realization of s^3 and s^2 is generally uniform throughout the Modern South Arabian languages, with s^2 retaining its pronunciation as a lateralized sibilant and s^3 being realized as a hissed sibilant s , assuming deaffrication of the s^3 ($*/ts/ > /s/$) as a proto-MSA development (Suchard 2017).

Another example of a relatively conservative feature in Modern South Arabian is the realization of the so-called emphatic consonants as ejectives, attested in both Mehri and Šḥeri, at least (Watson and Heselwood 2016:29).

An innovation present in Soqotri is the appearance of an unetymological h in lieu of historically long vowels, which were reduced in non-stressed positions, leading to forms such as *ḳátmeḥəm* (cf., Mehri *ḳəṭmīm*) “butter”. This characteristic phonological innovation is particularly important for the reconstruction of proto-MSA (Kogan 2015:475).

2.3.3. Morphology

2.3.3.1. Gender

Like the other Semitic languages, the Modern South Arabian languages have a bipartite sex-based grammatical gender, i.e.: masculine and feminine (Simeone-Senelle 2011:1084). Gender is marked on pronouns, nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

2.3.3.2. Number

There are three numbers in Modern South Arabian: singular, dual, and plural. Number is marked on nouns, pronouns, adjectives and verbs. Unique amongst the Semitic languages is the fact that a first-person dual pronoun is attested for Mehri (Rubin 2018:51).¹³¹

¹³⁰ In the case of Mehri, Simeone Senelle (2011:1081) states that Mehri has two or three short vowels: $/a/$, $/ə/$ (and $/ε/$); Watson (2012) notes three short vowels in Yemeni Mehri (Mahriyot): $/a/$, i and $/u/$; and two vowels in Omani Mehri, i.e., $/a/$ and i . Rubin, (2018:38) on the other hand, gives five short vowels, i.e., $/a/$, $/ε/$, $/ə/$, i and $/u/$. However, Bendjaballah and Ségeral (2017:186) argue that there are no phonologically long vowels in Omani Mehri. Instead, all long vowels are allophonic realizations of five short vowels (also mentioned by Rubin) occurring either as a result of stressed open syllables, or compensatory lengthening.

¹³¹ Kogan considers the dual pronouns $*kī$, $*Vī$, and $*šī$ as a proto-MSA innovation, noting the marked differences from Arabic $ʔantumā$ and *humā* and Sabaic $ʔtmy$ and *hmy* (Kogan 2015:478)

2.2.3.3. Pronouns

The pronominal system found in the Modern South Arabian languages reflects one of the largest inventories in Semitic. Personal pronouns can occur both in both independent and enclitic forms. They are inflected for two genders (masculine and feminine) and three numbers: singular, dual, and plural. The dual independent personal pronoun, which is otherwise unknown in other Semitic languages, goes back to a Proto-MSA form, in which the dual suffix *-i* was marked on the basic pronominal form (Kogan 2015:478).

There are up to three sets of demonstrative pronouns in the MSA languages. Mehri distinguishes two demonstrative pronouns, in the proximal and distal deixis (Rubin 2018:66). Soqotri uses demonstrative pronouns to express proximal and medial deixis, but deictic adverbs to express the distal. Furthermore, depending on the language, the demonstrative pronouns are inflected for two (singular and plural) or three (singular, dual, and plural) numbers. Gender marking of the demonstrative pronoun is only retained in the singular (Rubin 2018:66). A smaller set of diminutive demonstrative pronouns exists in Mehri, which is formed with the infix *-īy-* after the first consonant (e.g., *dōmah* > *dīyōmah*, “this”) (Watson 2014:80)

The relative pronouns in the Modern South Arabian languages likely go back to a common Proto-MSA singular **d(V)-* and plural **il-*. This is reflected in (Omani Mehri and Hobyot *d(ə)-*; *əd-*, Shehret *ε-*; *d-*. (Simeone-Senelle 2011:1101)

2.2.3.4. Nominal morphology

The noun in Modern South Arabian languages is marked for gender and number. No evidence for a case system exists in any Modern South Arabian language.

As in most other Semitic languages, masculine nouns and adjectives are generally unmarked, whereas singular feminine nouns generally take the ending *-Vt*, which in Soqotri has weakened to *-Vh* (Simeone-Senelle 2011:1084). A small number of feminine nouns are unmarked. These either have female referents (e.g., Mehri *hāmē*, Shehret *em*, “mother”; Mehri *wōz*, Shehret *ɔz* “female goat”), refer to body parts occurring in pairs (e.g., Mehri *ayn*, “eye”; *āgrēz*, “testicle”) or feminine loanwords from Arabic (e.g., Mehri *dunyā*, “world”). An even smaller number of nouns are of variable gender, such as Mehri *mawsē* “rain” and *kəlōn*, “bride; groom” (Rubin 2018:86–87).

Both an external and internal plural are attested, although internal plurals are much more commonly used (Simeone-Senelle 2011:1085).

The masculine external plural is characterized by a nasal following a (historical) long consonant (Mehri *denōb* > *dənābīn*; Shehret *dunub* > *dēnbin*; Socotri *denob* > *denb-əhən*, “tails”) (Kogan 2015:474), whereas the feminine is marked by a (historical) long vowel and a suffixed dental and nasal, e.g., Mehri *kawbūt* > *kəlab-tən*, “wolves (f.)”. The origin of this nasal is unclear.¹³² Broadly speaking,

¹³² Kogan states that “[t]his ending does not lend itself to a straightforward diachronic analysis”, but notes the similarities with the the Geʿez plural ending *-ān* and the Arabic (oblique) plural *-īn* are possible (Kogan 2015:474)

the MSA internal plural is characterized by both internal vowel alternation and the usage of affixes. Because of the large degree of variation, it is difficult to establish a strict set of internal plurals, as the number of possible patterns differs between languages.¹³³

The definite article exists in most MSA languages but is not productive across the board.¹³⁴ Outside Hobyot and Soqotri, the definite article appears as a prefixed vowel, whose quality depends on the phonological environment (i.e., OMeh. & Jib. /a/ or /ε/-; Har. & Baṭ /ʔa/-).¹³⁵ An allophonic variant of the definite article occurs as *hV-*,¹³⁶ which is comparatively more common in Harsusi (Johnstone 1977). The origins of this definite article are unclear. Since the definite article is attested, either productively or in fossilized forms in all the Modern South Arabian languages, it seems likely that it developed in proto-MSA. However, whether it is related to the definite article of Central Semitic remains to be determined. Voigt (1998:249–50) suggests that the same demonstrative pronoun that developed into a definite article in Central Semitic (i.e., **han-*), was borrowed into (proto-)MSA, leading to two different outcomes, namely **ha-* > *ħa/ħə* and **ha-* > *a-/ə-*.

Finally, the diminutive patterns **C¹awēC²āC³* (e.g., Mehri *gawēlēd*, Shehret *géléd*, Soqotri *góuled*, ‘little skin’) and **C¹əC²ēC³ēn* (e.g., *ḍanēben*, ‘little tail’; Shehret *həriyén*, ‘little tree’, Soqotri *‘ourebhen*, ‘little crow’) likely represent Proto-MSA forms (Kogan 2015:477–78).

2.2.3.5. Verbal morphology

In terms of verbal morphology, there are a few generalities that apply to all Modern South Arabian languages. The verbal system is generally similar to that of other Semitic languages: the suffix-conjugation mostly expresses perfective aspect; the prefix-conjugations express imperfect aspect. The prefix conjugation can be divided into indicative, subjunctive, and conditional moods, respectively.¹³⁷ Furthermore, Mehri displays the presence of a future marker (Kogan 2015:468)

Modern South Arabian verbs are conjugated for three persons and numbers, first-, second-, and third person, and singular, dual, and plural, respectively.¹³⁸ The following table is based on data from Omani Mehri, Shehret, and Soqotri:

¹³³ Rubin (Rubin 2014; 2018) identifies five and four different types in Mehri and Shehret respectively. For Soqotri, Kogan and Bulach list ten of the most common broken plural patterns (Kogan and Bulach 2019:202).

¹³⁴ For example, in Soq. the definite article is retained only in its fossilized form.

¹³⁵ In essence, OMeh. & Jib. /a/ or /ε/- Har. & Baṭ /ʔa/-.

¹³⁶ For example, OMeh. *ḥayd*, ‘hand’; *ḥām*, ‘mother’; Har. *ḥayb*, ‘father’, *ḥəwḡōr*, ‘slave’.

¹³⁷ The terminology differs here from author to author. Simeone-Senelle uses the term imperfect and divides that into indicative, subjunctive and conditional categories. In their discussion of Soqotri, Kogan and Bulach speaks of an imperfective and a jussive (2019:294), which corresponds to Simeone-Senelle’s indicative and subjunctive, respectively.

¹³⁸ According to Simeone-Senelle (2011:1092), there is no dual conjugation in Omani Mehri, but this is inaccurate. The 1st person and 2nd person duals have merged in the suffix conjugation but are kept distinct in the suffix conjugation.

Table 8: Verbal suffixes in various Modern South Arabian languages

	O.Meh			She.			Soq.		
	SG.	DL	PL.	SG.	DL.	PL.	SG.	DL.	PL.
3. M F	– - <i>Vt</i>	- <i>ōh/-əh</i> - <i>tōh/-təh</i>	- <i>əm</i> –	– - <i>ət</i>	- <i>ɔ</i> - <i>tɔ</i>	– –	– - <i>o</i>	- <i>o</i> - <i>eto</i>	– * –
2. M F	- <i>k</i> - <i>š</i>	- <i>ki</i>	- <i>kəm</i> - <i>kən</i>	-(<i>ə</i>) <i>k</i> -(<i>ə</i>) <i>s</i>	- <i>əsi</i>	- <i>əkum</i> - <i>əkən</i>	- <i>k</i> - <i>š</i>	- <i>ki</i> - <i>ki</i>	- <i>ken</i> - <i>ken</i>
1 C	- <i>k</i>	- <i>ki</i>	- <i>ən</i>	-(<i>ə</i>) <i>k</i>	- <i>əsi</i>	- <i>ən</i>	- <i>k</i>	- <i>ki</i>	- <i>en</i>

The Modern South Arabian prefix conjugation goes back to the proto-Semitic present **yiqattal*, which developed into the indicative, whereas the proto-Semitic preterit **yiqtul* developed into the subjunctive (Weninger 2011b:159) It shares these features with the Ethio-Semitic languages and distinguishes it from Central Semitic. Furthermore, Proto-Modern South Arabian prefix conjugation is further by the sound change **u* to **a* of the first vowel, the presence of an apophonic vowel **a* in the thematic vowel, and finally, the presence of a suffixed -n in certain verbs (Dufour 2016:411–12). This pattern is attested in most MSA languages (Kogan 2015:472; Simeone-Senelle 2015:15). Kogan argues that the presence of this nasal is either connected to the long form of the Central Semitic prefix conjugation¹³⁹ or the energetic mood (Kogan 2015:473).

As Dufour notes, any verb that is marked by the suffixed -n is characterized by a change of the thematic vowel (*V*₂) into **i* (e.g., Mehri *yerōkəb ~yərəkben*) (Dufour 2016:416). Noting the potential connection with the Akkadian present *uparras*, Dufour furthermore suggests that the presence of the etymological vowel **i* in Modern South Arabian may in fact reflect the proto-Semitic form, considering the presence of the vowel **a* in Akkadian a possible innovation (Dufour 2016:416). In any case, the Modern South Arabian verbal morphology points towards a highly archaic stratum of Semitic.

The Modern South Arabian prefix conjugation can express the following modalities: indicative, subjunctive, and conditional. Continuous aspect is usually expressed by the usage of the relative pronoun *ǧ-* (e.g., Mehri *ǧ-asyūr*, “I am going”). An unusual feature of the first-person subjunctive is the appearance of a prefixed l-based particle (Kogan and Bulakh 2019; Simeone-Senelle 2011; Watson 2014). This is probably connected to a proto-Semitic asseverate particle *la-li* (Testen 2017:113–14; Weninger 2011b:170).

Table 9: First person indicative and subjunctive forms in MSA

	Indicative	Subjunctive.
Omani Mehri	<i>a-sōbaʃ</i>	<i>la-sbāʃ</i>
Shehri	<i>ə-ḳodər</i>	<i>l-ḳodər</i>
Hobyot	<i>ε-ǧōrəb</i>	<i>l-gərēb</i>
Soqotri	<i>ʔe-fored</i>	<i>le-fred</i>

¹³⁹ See also the discussion on Sabaic above, 2.24.

Like most other Semitic languages, there are several derived verbal stems in Modern South Arabian. The internal mechanisms surrounding the usage of the verbal stems are complex and vary between the languages, although generally six different stems can be identified: the basic or G-stem; the causative or H-stem; the D/L-stem (reflecting a collapse of the West Semitic geminate and long stems); two Š-stems and two T-stems (Simeone-Senelle 2011:1090).

Furthermore, the Modern South Arabian languages possess an internal passive. The internal passive is characterized by a(n etymological) vowel *i* in the second syllable (table 10) (Naumkin and Kogan 2015:547; Rubin 2014:148, 155, 2018:119):

Table 10: Active and passive forms of the G-stem

	Omani Mehri	Shehri	Soqotri (Naumkin and Kogan 2015:557)
Perfect active	<i>ktūb</i> , “to write”	<i>létəg</i> , “to kill”	<i>gəšol</i> , “to break”
Perfect passive	<i>ktēb</i>	<i>ltīg</i>	<i>gišel</i>
Imperfect active	<i>yəkūtab</i>	<i>yəšfək</i> , “to allow”	<i>yəgášal</i>
Imperfect passive	<i>yəktōb</i>	<i>yošfək</i>	<i>yegoušol</i>

The development of the causative-reflexive stem in Modern South Arabian is unusual: it frequently denotes the reflexive of the H-stem (e.g., Mehri, *hə-wgūš*, ‘to take out the beasts in the afternoon; *šə-wgūš*, ‘to go out in the afternoon; Hobyot, *kəru*, ‘to hide something’; *šə-kru*, ‘to hide oneself’) (Kogan 2015:474; Nakano and Ratcliffe 2013:154–55). The MSA form is semantically identical to the Š-stem found in other Semitic languages (e.g., Classical Arabic *ʾaslama*, ‘to surrender (someone, something); *istaslama*, ‘to surrender oneself’) (Wright 2005:44). However, the historical relation between the Š-stem and the St-stem is unclear.

2.3.4. Syntax

2.3.4.1. Word order

Word order in the Modern South Arabian languages is either subject followed by predicate in nominal clauses or VSO in verbal clauses. This generally corresponds with the other Semitic languages.

2.3.4.2. Agreement

Rules regarding agreement are rather strict. Verbs, adjectives, demonstratives, and other related function words must agree with the subject in person, gender, and number.

Dual nouns tend to take deflected agreement, both with regards to verbs and adjectives (Simeone-Senelle 2015:22). In Omani Mehri, there is no dual declension for adjectives, which means that dual subjects take plural adjectives. Similarly,

dual nouns do not occur with possessive suffixes. If a noun with a possessive suffix is followed by the number “two”, the noun stands in the plural (Rubin 2018:89). The same process has occurred in Shehret (Rubin 2014:90). In the Shehret spoken on the Kuria Muria islands, there are some indications that demonstrative pronouns do not necessarily agree in number or gender with the noun (Castagna 2018:144).

Unusually for a Semitic language, pronominal suffixes can only occur *with* definite nouns in Omani Mehri (Watson 2014:67).¹⁴⁰

2.3.4.3. Direct object marker *tV-

The Modern South Arabian languages also possess a direct object marker *tV- (e.g., Omani Mehri *tī*, Shehret *tō*; Soqotri *tho*). The usage of the direct object marker varies from language to language, with Shehret generally being the strictest (Rubin 2014:55).

Although the usage of the direct object marker is attested in all Modern South Arabian languages, it does not normally appear among the features reconstructed for proto-MSA.¹⁴¹ The direct object marker is likely related to Biblical Hebrew *ʔat*, which can similarly take a pronominal suffix, in which case it has an allomorphic form *ʔōt-*; *ʔet-* (Waltke and O’Connor 1990:177–78). Both the Modern South Arabian and Hebrew direct object markers plausibly go back to a Proto-Semitic oblique *-t, which is attested in Akkadian *šuʔāti/u*, Ugaritic and Sabaic *hwt* (Weninger 2011b:168). The same object marker was retained in the 3rd person independent pronouns of Gəʕəz *wəʔatu* and *yəʔati*.

It is possible that direct object marker in (Biblical) Hebrew and Modern South Arabian represents a West or Proto-Semitic retention. Alternatively, its absence in the other Semitic languages could indicate that they represent independent developments.

2.3.4.4. Negation

There is no single strategy for negation shared by all Modern South Arabian languages (Kogan 2015:471). The development of negation in the Modern South Arabian languages differs from the other Semitic languages in different ways. Based on the principles of Jaspersen’s Cycle, Lucas (2013:409–410) argues that the original strategy for negation in the Modern South Arabian languages was that of phrase-initial monopartite negation. This system is retained only in Socotri, although frozen negated phrases and coordinated phrases in Mehri and Ḥarṣūṣī exhibit the same principle (Watson 2014:311). Omani Mehri, Shehret, and Hobyot exhibit bipartite negation, characterized by a pre-verbal negator and a clause-final

¹⁴⁰ Contrast *bayt*, ‘house’ vs *a-bāyt-i*, ‘my house’, with the latter being analyzed as DEF-‘house’-1.SG. (Rubin 2018:56)

¹⁴¹ For example, neither Kogan nor Dufour mention the direct object marker as a shared proto-MSA feature.

negator. Finally, western Yemeni Mehri and Ḥarsūṣī usually only exhibit use of a clause-final negator (Sjörs 2018:301)

Prohibitive clauses are generally formed using the subjunctive, which, depending on the language, is either preceded or followed by its respective negator. In Soqotri, a different negator is used to form the prohibitive, namely the particle *ʔa/ʔan/ħa-* (Simeone-Senelle 2011:1102–1103).

2.3.5. Lexicon

The Modern South Arabian lexicon was extensively studied by Kogan (Kogan 2015), who divides it into four distinct categories: 1) proto-Semitic retentions, 2) Pan-MSA vocabulary, 3) Soqotri-Shehret isoglosses and 4) Soqotri isoglosses (Kogan 2015:15–17).

In his summary of the Proto-Semitic words in the Modern South Arabian languages, Kogan distinguishes trivial and non-trivial retention. The former consist of exact phonological and semantic descendants of the Proto-Semitic lexeme, whereas the latter comprise Proto-Semitic lexemes whose basic meaning cannot be reliably reconstructed. Kogan lists twenty-three trivial retentions, to which he adds eleven lexemes which are retained in at least one Modern South Arabian language (2015:533–36). This analysis of the Proto-Semitic retentions in Modern South Arabian indicates a comparatively high degree of loss of basic vocabulary.

In his doctoral thesis, Castagna suggests that some of the Modern South Arabian languages' basic vocabulary may have been borrowed from an Austronesian language. Based on documentary and archaeological evidence, Castagna argues that Austronesian speakers might have been in contact with (proto-)Modern South Arabian speakers during between the 7th and 14th centuries AD. Specifically, Castagna mentions seven nouns and the personal pronoun “I”, as well as the interrogatives “what; where” (Castagna 2018). The loss of proto-Semitic inherited lexemes and their replacement with new forms could therefore possibly be attributed to Austronesian substrate influence.

Apart from the few lexical items found in both the Epigraphic South Arabian languages, there has been comparatively little systematic research on possible shared vocabulary between the Epigraphic South Arabian and Modern South Arabian languages (Prioletta 2014:107).

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2.4. Gəʕəz

Linguistic and cultural relations between East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula go back to the prehistoric period. Phylogenetic analysis shows that speakers of a Semitic language likely entered the Horn of Africa by crossing the Red Sea from South Arabia around the 2nd millennium BC (Kitchen et al. 2009). Furthermore, as was previously discussed, the South Arabian script was introduced to Ethiopia by way mercantile relations with the Sabaeans the Red Sea coast around the 8th century BC (1.1.2.) (Dugast and Gajda 2012:15–16) (Dillmann 2005:15).

The Gəʕəz language likely originated in what are now Eritrea and the highlands of Ethiopia, although it came to be used over a much broader area. The first Gəʕəz texts have survived in the form of epigraphy, attested from around 400 BC to the 6th century AD (Anfray 1991:31–36). The Gəʕəz epigraphic material ranges to around 200 inscription, most of which are relatively short.

Following the spread of Christianity in the 4th century AD, a distinct Ethiopian manuscript tradition developed. During this period, Gəʕəz literary works primarily consisted of religious material, such apocrypha, liturgical texts, hagiographies, and so on. Between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD, Gəʕəz was also occasionally used

in South Arabia, a result of the Aksumites' political activity in the region. Gəʿəz diminished as a spoken language following the collapse of the Aksumite state in the 7th century AD (Butts 2019:118).

This period of decline coincided with climatic change, the rise of Islam and a decrease in Red Sea mercantile activity (Kelly 2020). Following the ascent to power of the Solomonic dynasty in the 13th century, Gəʿəz had died out as a spoken language, but was maintained for literary and religious purposes and was widely used until at least the 17th century (Hetzron 1998:243). Gəʿəz remains the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, whose clergy is instructed in the reading and recitation of the language (Weninger 2011a:1125)

Several hundreds of Gəʿəz inscriptions from the pre- and early Aksumite periods represent the oldest stage of the language (Weninger 2011a:1124). Most of the Gəʿəz corpus consists of manuscripts, dating to both the Aksumite and Solomonid periods. The majority of these manuscripts represent translations from other languages, predominantly Greek and Arabic, which exerted their own influence on the Gəʿəz language (Kropp 1986). Furthermore, as Amharic became the main spoken language of Ethiopia from the 11th century onwards, most Gəʿəz texts were written by Amharic native speakers, which also influenced Gəʿəz (Dillmann 2005:11; Sima and Waltisberg 2010).

2.4.1. Orthography

The Ethiopian script (*Gz. fidal*) is a so-called alpha-syllabary, meaning that every symbol represents both consonant and a vowel. The Gəʿəz phonological inventory (see more below) consists of 26 consonants, of which four can be labialized, and 7 vowels, resulting in a total of 182 different symbols (Butts 2019:119–20).

The Ethiopian script is directly derived from the South Arabian alphabet, which was introduced to the region during the period of Sabaean colonization, c. 700 BC. In its earliest incarnation, the Ethiopic script was unvocalized. However, from around the 4th century AD onwards, both the alpha-syllabic system and the distinct way of marking the labio-velar consonants was developed. Around the same time, Gəʿəz came to be exclusively written from left-to-right.¹⁴²

2.4.2. Phonology

Descriptions of Gəʿəz phonology are predominantly informed by the traditional pronunciation practiced by members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as well as by comparison with other Semitic languages. Although the traditional pronunciation is influenced above all by Amharic and thus does not represent the full inventory of Gəʿəz phonemes, it remains the only source for understanding

¹⁴² This is a relatively uncommon development for languages written in a Semitic script, although it must be noted that the first Sabaic inscriptions could be written from both from left-to-right, right-to-left, as well as boustrophedon. From a relatively early moment onwards Sabaic came to be written exclusively from right-to-left, however (Hatke 2019).

phenomena such as stress, gemination, and the distinction between vowelless syllables and syllables with *schwa* (Gragg 1998:244; Weninger 2011c:83).

Gəʕəz possesses seven distinct vowels: /æ/ (transcribed as *a*), /u/, /i/, /ā/, /e/, /ə/ and /o/. Phonemic vowel length was lost in Gəʕəz. The earlier diphthongs /aw/ and /ay/ have monophthongized to /e/ and /o/, respectively (Butts 2019:122). A typical sound law affecting Gəʕəz is the reduction of the vowels *u* and *i* to *ə* (Lipinski 1997:379).

There are twenty-five consonants in Gəʕəz, with several consonants having merged with others (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:39–41):

- a. The proto-Semitic interdentals /t̪/, /d̪/ and /z̪/ lenited to /s/, /z/ and /t̪/.
- b. The sibilants *s*¹ and *s*³ merged, leading to a single sibilant /s/.
- c. The uvular fricative /ǧ/ generally merged with /ʕ/, but there are occasional attestations of etymological /ǧ/ merging with /ħ/.

The four labialized consonants are all velar stops: /k^w/, /g^w/, /ħ^w/ and /ḳ^w/. Labialization is conditioned by the presence of a following rounded vowel and can be seen in both inherited lexemes (such as **kullu* > *k^wəll* “all”; **ʔaḥū* > *ʔəḥ^w*, “brother”) and loanwords (Aramaic *targūm* > *targ^wama*, “to translate”) (Gragg 1998; Weninger 2011a). The presence of labialized consonants can be ascribed to influence from neighboring Cushitic languages (Tosco 2000:338).

Although no longer reflected in the traditional pronunciation, the Ethiopic script distinguishes between *s* (representing the merger proto-Semitic of *s*¹ and *s*³) and *š* (*s*²), known as *sāt* and *šāwt* respectively (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:24). The latter is assumed to have been pronounced as a lateral fricative [ɬ], corresponding to its pronunciation in the Modern South Arabian languages.

A particularity of Gəʕəz is the presence of four different labial consonants, *p*, *p̣*, *b* and *f*. Of these, only *b* and *f* are inherited from proto-Semitic, the two unvoiced labial stops occur almost entirely in Greek loanwords (Gragg 1998:244).

2.4.3. Morphology

2.4.3.1. Gender

There are two grammatical genders in Gəʕəz, masculine and feminine. Like in the other languages treated so far, masculine nouns are unmarked, whereas feminine nouns are usually marked with the feminine ending *-(a)t*. The ending *-at* is used when the preceding nominal base ends on two consonants, *-t* is used in nearly all other cases, for example *dəḥn-at*, ‘salvation’ but *negušt*, ‘queen’. Furthermore, the feminine form of *qa(t)til*-type adjectives are formed through an internal vocalic change (apophony), in which case the pattern changes to *qattāl* (e.g., *ʕazziz* (m.) > *ʕazzāz* (f.) ‘mighty’) (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:105).

As Hasselbach (2014:34) notes, grammatical gender in Gəʕəz is strictest when the referent of a noun is an animate, particularly with regards to human beings. Many inanimate nouns tend to fluctuate in terms of grammatical gender, with many unmarked nouns taking either masculine or feminine agreement.

2.4.3.2. Number

Gəʕəz only distinguishes between a singular and a plural, which is marked on nouns, pronouns, verbs, and adjectives. The dual has functionally disappeared, only being retained in a very small number of nouns (e.g., *kəlʕe*, “two; both”; *ħaqʷe*, “hip”, and *ʔəde* (construct), “hand” (Heide 2006)). No traces of dual marking exist on either verbs or adjectives.

2.4.3.3. Pronouns

Personal pronouns can occur independently or as clitics. There are two numbers, singular and plural. As with the noun, the accusative vs non-accusative distinction is maintained for the independent third-person singular pronouns, which are marked with *-a* (Butts 2019:123).

Gəʕəz distinguishes two deices: proximal (nearer) and distal (further). Both forms can be expressed using two different sets of pronouns, which are identical in meaning (appendices, table 4).

The relative pronoun is derived from the demonstrative pronouns and is identical in form and meaning. Although the relative pronoun is declined for number and gender (in the singular), the masculine relative pronoun *za-* can be used invariably.

2.4.3.4. Nominal morphology

The regular sound change that affected the change /*u*/, *i* to /*ə*/ also affected the Gəʕəz case system. This resulted in explicit case marking only being retained for the accusative, while the nominative and genitive are unmarked. However, the construct state is also marked by *-a*. Compare nominative/genitive *ħəzb*, vs accusative/construct *ħəzba*, “people” (Weninger 2011a:1132).

Both an external and internal plural are used. The internal plural is marked by the suffixes *-at* and *-ān*. The suffix *-āt*, derived from the feminine ending **-āt*, can be used for both masculine and feminine nouns (e.g., *nagəšt*, “queen” > *nəgeštāt*, “queens”; *nabiy*, “prophet” > *nabiyāt*, “prophets”). A relatively small number of adjectives is marked by the suffix *-an*, e.g., *lik*, “elder” > *likān*, “elders” (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:107–9)

Most nouns take their plural through internal modification, such as *dabr*, “mountain” > *ʔadbār*, “mountains”; *wald*, “son” > *wəlud*, “sons”. Some nouns can have more than one broken plural, such as *ħəzb*, “nation; people”, whose plurals are *ħəzab* and *ʔəħzāb*. There are also attestations of double plurals, such as *ʔəħgurāt*, “cities” < *ʔəħgur*, itself a plural of *ħagar* (Butts 2019:127–28).

2.4.3.5. Verbal morphology

The verbal system of Gəʕəz is relatively conservative and regular. Verbs are conjugated for three persons, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd; two genders, masculine and feminine; and two numbers, singular and plural. (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:131).

As with the other Semitic languages discussed so far, there are two systems of conjugation: a prefix- and a suffix-conjugation. The suffix-conjugation, also referred to as the perfect, primarily expresses completed actions that occurred in the past (perfective aspect). The prefix-conjugation is further divided into two different categories, namely the imperfect and the jussive or subjunctive. The imperfect primarily expresses actions in the present or future, while the jussive expresses volition in main clauses and purpose or result in subordinate clauses (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:130–38).

There is no evidence of an internal passive in Gəʕəz (Huehnergard 2019:65). Instead, passive voice is expressed through the use of participles or adjectives and periphrastic constructions (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:145, 320).

Transitivity is usually marked through by way of two distinct verbal types, referred to respectively as *nagara*- and *gabra*-type verbs. *Nagara*-type verbs are predominantly transitive, whereas *gabra*-type verbs are predominantly intransitive. The two verb types historically derive from a vocalic distinction **nagara* versus **gabū/ira*, reflecting an older Semitic system.¹⁴³

There are twelve derived stems in Gəʕəz, which are fairly productive. The derived stems are created through the combination of various infixes and/or by the lengthening of consonants and/or vowels. Eight of the twelve derived stems have parallel forms in the Semitic languages, so four of the derived stems represent Gəʕəz innovations (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:150–52).

2.4.4. Syntax

2.4.4.1. Word order

The early Gəʕəz inscriptions show that normally, objects tend to follow the verb rather than vice versa. The same tends to go for verb-subject type clauses, although there is a generally higher distribution of subject-verb clauses than object-verb clauses. This distinction likely arose through explicit focalization (Bulakh 2012).

Because much of the Gəʕəz literary corpus consists of Greek and Arabic translations, predominantly prepared by scribes who spoke Amharic as their native language, these languages came to exert significant influence on the syntax of medieval Gəʕəz (Sima and Waltisberg 2010:90–92).

2.4.4.2. Agreement

Strict agreement tends to only occur in the case of animates, while inanimate nouns tend to be much more fluid (Hasselbach 2014:34). Inanimate plural nouns can take either singular or plural agreement or masculine or feminine agreement, for example *bəzūḥ ʔaḥzab*, “many peoples”; *ʔalbas šannayt*, “beautiful clothes” (Weninger 2011a:1134).

¹⁴³ Etymologically, *gabra*-type verbs likely developed from the patterns **faʕula*; **faʕila*, which are attested in Classical Arabic mostly with intransitive verbs, for example Gəʕəz *məlʔa* ~ Ar. *maliʔa*, “to be full” (Wright 2005:30)

Some Gəʕəz inscriptions from the Aksumite period display the usage of a ‘royal plural’. In these inscriptions, the king regularly refers to himself in the plural (Littmann 1913:28):

DAE 10:1,8

<i>ʕĒzānā waləd</i>	<i>ʔəlla ʕAmīdā</i>	<i>bə-ʔəsyā</i>	<i>ḥalēn</i>	<i>nəguś</i>	<i>ʔaksum</i>
<i>ʕĒzānā son.CON</i>	<i>Ella ʕAmīda</i>	<i>of-tribe</i>	<i>Ḥalēn</i>	<i>king.CON</i>	<i>Aksum</i>
<i>sobē</i>	(...)	<i>gafu^s-na</i>	(...)		
<i>when</i>	(...)	<i>attacked.3.SG.-1.PL</i>	(...)		

“Ēzāna, son of Ella Amida, of the tribe of Ḥalēn, king of Aksum (...) when they attacked us (...)”

2.4.4.3. Negation

Like most other Semitic languages, Gəʕəz distinguishes between verbal and nominal negation. Most verbal clauses are negated with the particle *i-*, which is prefixed to the verb (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:354). The same verbal negators are attested in Tigre as *i-* and in Tigrinye as *ʔay*. This is eventually derived from an older negative particle *ʔay*, which is attested in older Aksumite and older Gəʕəz documents manuscripts also show a negator *ʔay*. All of these eventually go back to Proto-Ethio-Semitic negator **al-*, through the palatalization of /l/ (Gragg 1998:257; Sjörs 2018:91–94).¹⁴⁴

Gəʕəz nominal clauses are negated with the particle *ʔalbo*, *ʔakko* and *ʔi-*. The particle *ʔalbo* consists of the negator **ʔal-* with the preposition *ba-*, “in, by, with”. If necessary, pronominal suffixes can also be added to the negator, e.g., *ʔalbəya*, *ʔalbəka*, and so on (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:342).

The particle *ʔakko* derives from **al-* plus the copula *kona*, “to be”. This particle is predominantly used in the negation of single words, such as *wa-ʔakko ʔamlāka məwutān*, “[he is] not the Lord of the Dead”). Furthermore, the particle *ʔakko* is often used in conjunction with the interrogative particle *-nu*, mainly in declarative sentences (Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:342–43).¹⁴⁵

2.4.5. Lexicon

The Gəʕəz lexicon is characterized by various strata. The earliest stratum reflects a basic Proto-(West-)Semitic vocabulary. However, certain Proto-Ethiosemitic terms derive from neighboring Cushitic languages, which appears to have replaced some basic Semitic vocabulary (Kogan 2015:448). Furthermore, Kogan (2015:445–46) draws attention to the replacement of certain Proto-Semitic

¹⁴⁴ The negation of the Old Assyrian vetitive *ē* (<*ʔay*) is commonly thought be derived from the interrogative particle **ʔayy(u)* (Lipinski 1997:515). Sjörs argues against this and proposes a similar development to that of Ethio-Semitic (Sjörs 2018:91–94)

¹⁴⁵ In Tigrinya, the interrogative *-n* developed further into the obligatory second part of bipartite negation, e.g., *nəḥna ənem ḥada nagar ʔay-gabarna-n*, “we didn’t do anything” (Lucas 2013:420).

lexemes with other terms, specifically *ʔard- > *mVdr*, “earth”; *ʔkl > *blʕ* “to eat”, *sʔams*²- > **daḥay*, “sun”; and **tin-a* > **klʔ*, “two”. Although all of these terms have Semitic etymologies, the disappearance of otherwise well-retained Semitic basic lexemes is notable.

Greek terms had already become part of the Gəʕəz lexicon by the 1st century AD, following the intensification of contact with North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. As Weninger (2005:469–70) notes, the Aksumite scribes’ insufficient understanding of Greek (and later Hebrew) often led to such words being left untranslated. In the case of the former, with case endings left intact, e.g., *gipos*, derived from Greek *gīpos*, genitive of *gip*, “greedy”.

Following Aksum’s conversion to Christianity in the 4th century AD, the number of Greek loanwords grew exponentially, together with words of Aramaic and Hebrew origins. During this period, the Greek loanwords were more coherently integrated in to the Gəʕəz lexicon and given Gəʕəz loan translations.¹⁴⁶ In many cases, the Greek nominative ending was retained, such as *manakos*, “monk” < Greek *monakos*, although these nouns were subsequently morphologically adapted to the structure of Gəʕəz, such as *manakosāwī*, “monastic”. This also shows that by this time, the Gəʕəz scribal class had become much more familiar with Greek.

Following the Aksumite period, post-600 AD, the Gəʕəz lexicon was significantly influenced by Amharic, which had gained ground as the main spoken language in Ethiopia. In the centuries following, scholarly contact with the Coptic Church in Egypt also led to the adoption of both Coptic and Arabic loanwords, as much of the theological literature in Egypt was written in Greek (Weninger 2005:473–75).

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¹⁴⁶ Weninger provides *gaṣṣ*, ‘face’ in its theological context as an example of a loan translation from Greek *prosōpon*, id (Weninger 2005:470).

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2.5. Arabic

Although Arabic represents both the main spoken and written language of the Arabian Peninsula in the 21st century, its arrival in South Arabia post-dates that of Sabaic and the Modern South Arabian languages, and possibly Gəʿəz as well.

Before moving on to the following section, it is necessary to clarify a few things. Firstly, descriptive overviews of Arabic tend to focus predominantly or exclusively on a single variety of Arabic, usually Classical Arabic. As this dissertation predominantly deals with Arabic in the pre-Classical period, and specifically in the South Arabian context, the following overview will present material from pre-Classical and South Arabian varieties of Arabic. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Classical Arabic is indispensable for any description of Arabic, if only due to the vast size of its corpus. Wherever relevant, references to Classical Arabic will be made.

Secondly, in the contemporary Arabic-speaking world two varieties of Arabic are used simultaneously, depending on the speakers’ social context. This simultaneous usage of two varieties or registers of the same language is referred to as diglossia (Ferguson 1959a).¹⁴⁷ The ‘low’ register is represented by the various Arabic vernaculars while the ‘high’ register is Classical or Modern Standard Arabic (Ferguson 1959b:616).¹⁴⁸ Although the origins of the modern Arabic vernaculars remains a controversial issue, it is generally accepted that they do not descend from Classical Arabic (Versteegh 2014:138–50).

Thirdly, the study of the historical development of Arabic has certain terminological issues. For example, it is not always clear how scholars use terms like

¹⁴⁷ This term was first introduced by Ferguson in the eponymous article, and, although generally lauded, also received some criticism. Sometimes diglossia is used more broadly simply to refer to any two languages being used for different purposes in the same linguistic community.

¹⁴⁸ It is worth noting that in the Arabic-speaking world, the term *fushḥā* is applied for both Classical and Modern Standard Arabic, although the term *al-ʿarabiyya al-fuṣḥā al-ḥadīṭa* is occasionally used to refer to the latter.

“Old”, “Pre-Classical” and “Classical Arabic” and how they distinguish between them. Furthermore, the term “Ancient North Arabian”, which in essence refers to a group of scripts, is occasionally used conflated with pre-Islamic Arabic. For the purposes of clarity, these terms are defined as follows:

- 1) Proto-Arabic refers to the reconstructed ancestor language of Arabic and from which all attested forms of Arabic descend. By its nature, proto-Arabic is unattested.
- 2) Old Arabic refers to varieties of Arabic attested in the pre-Islamic period, often in a variety of scripts. These include North Arabian, South Arabian, Nabataean, Greek, and so on.
- 3) Quranic Arabic refers to the spoken form of 6th century Hijazi Arabic, represented by the Quranic consonantal text.
- 4) Classical Arabic refers to the varieties of Arabic described and endorsed by the medieval grammarian tradition, starting from the 8th to 9th century AD.

For a long time, the scholarly consensus held that the written history of Arabic began with the Quran.¹⁴⁹ This assumption is partially the result of an uncritical acceptance of Islamic-period accounts of Arabic’s early history. According to such accounts, the Arabs of the pre-Islamic period spoke and composed oral poetry in a register functionally identical to Classical Arabic but rarely, if ever, wrote this language down (Fischer 1998:187–88). A notable exception to this rule were the so-called *mu‘allaqāt*, which received their name (“hanging; suspended”) due to the fact that they were written down and draped down from the Ka‘ba (Larcher 2010:201)

In more recent years, the decipherment of a vast amount of pre-Islamic epigraphic material has led to a critical re-evaluation of this view (Al-Jallad 2017b).¹⁵⁰ The inscriptions from northern and central Arabia have led to new understandings of the history of Arabic before the codification of the Quran and the foundations of the medieval grammatical tradition. At the same time, the epigraphic material presents its own difficulties. Relatively few of these inscriptions are dated or give sufficient contextual clues to determine at what time they were written (Al-Jallad 2015a:17–18).¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Nicholson (“very few among the Pre-islamic Arabs were able to read or write” (1995:xxi–ii)), Nöldeke (“the art of writing among the Meccans and Medinans in the age of Muḥammad was anything but common” (2013:8)), Rabin (“West-Arabian was a non-literary language. Its speakers have left us no written monuments (...) (1951:2–3))

¹⁵⁰ Although much of the epigraphic material has been known since at least the middle of the 19th century, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that the first Safaitic inscriptions were deciphered. Their linguistic and historical value was not realized until very recently (Al-Jallad 2015a; Macdonald 2000)

¹⁵¹ An example of a North Arabian (Safaitic) inscription that gives a contextual clue is HAUI 72, which mentions “the year of Caesar and the Persians” (*sʿnt qsr w-h-mḏy*), which could theoretically refer to any moment between the middle of the 1st century BC until the beginning of the 7th century AD (Al-Jallad 2015a:68)

The pre-Islamic scripts¹⁵² attested in the west and north of Arabian Peninsula are usually referred to as “Ancient North Arabian” (Macdonald 2000). Individually, these scripts are named after the region(s) in which they were discovered.¹⁵³ Whereas South Arabian represents a genealogically closely related group of scripts, the internal relation of the different North Arabian script forms is much more poorly understood (Al-Jallad 2018). Furthermore, although all these scripts are attested on the Arabian Peninsula, not all of them were used to write Arabic (Macdonald 2009:313–16).

One of these script forms, Safaitic, shows that speakers of Old Arabic inhabited the area known as the Ḥarrah, located in what is now southern Syria, eastern Jordan, and northwestern Saudi-Arabia (Al-Jallad 2017b). It is difficult to assess when speakers of Arabic were first active in this region, and although most scholars estimate that many inscriptions were written starting from the 1st century BC, it is possible that the writing tradition in the region goes back as far as the 7th century BC (Al-Jallad 2019).

In the 4th century BC, the rulers of the Nabataean kingdom (4th century BC – 106 AD) adopted a form of Aramaic in an official capacity, referred to as Late Imperial Aramaic. The Nabataeans also took on and modified the Aramaic script, which would later develop into the Arabic script. Although Aramaic became the Nabataeans’ administrative language, the Nabataeans’ spoken language was likely a form of Old Arabic. An important indication of this is that many of the Late Imperial Aramaic from Nabataea inscriptions are characterized by a strong Arabic substrate influence (Gzella 2011a).

Some speakers of Arabic adopted the Nabataean Aramaic script wholesale and used it to write texts in Arabic. The votive ‘Ēn Avdat inscription (pre-150 AD), otherwise written in Aramaic, contains two lines in Arabic. The Namarah inscription (328 AD) is almost entirely composed in Arabic, with just a few borrowings from Aramaic (Kropp 2006).

In the following centuries, Arabic spread southwards over the Arabian Peninsula. This process seems to have accelerated around the 4th century AD, leading to the gradual disappearance of the various North Arabian script forms and the widespread adoption of the paleo-Arabic script (Al-Azmeh 2014:151–52). Several of such inscriptions have been found at near the South Arabian cultural area, at the site of Biʿr Ḥimā, near Najran. The language of these inscriptions seems

¹⁵² In fact, this division starts almost immediately north of the South Arabian cultural area, as inscriptions in North Arabian script forms have been attested in what is now southwest Saudi Arabia.

¹⁵³ These script forms are referred to respectively as Safaitic, Thamudic, Hismaic, Taymanitic, Dadanitic and Hasaitic, however, not all of the languages found in these inscriptions are well-understood. The Safaitic, Taymanitic and Dadanitic corpora are probably the best understood, whereas Hismaic (originally categorized as a form of Thamudic) and Hasaitic represent smaller corpora. As Macdonald points out, the term Thamudic is completely artificial and serves as something as ‘wastebin’ for all inscriptions that do not fit into a better category (Macdonald 2000:33)

to predominantly be of Old Arabic with some Aramaicisms (Robin, Al-Ghabban, and Fāyiz Al-Sa'īd 2014:1036–1040).

2.5.1. Orthography

As just noted, the first speakers of Arabic did not use the Arabic script. Instead, Old Arabic speakers wrote their language in a many different scripts, including North Arabian, South Arabian and Greek (Gruendler 2011:148–49). The first evidence of the Arabic script dates to the 4th century AD, having evolved from the Nabatean script, which itself developed from the earlier Aramaic *abjad* and was developed for use of the chancellery in the Nabatean kingdom (Gruendler 2011:149).

An early version of the Arabic script was eventually adopted by the Arabic-speaking community of the Hijaz (Versteegh 2014:61–62). With the codification of the Quran, the Arabic script became the standard for writing Arabic in the centuries following. The Quranic consonantal text already indicates the usage of the letters *ʾalif*, *waw* and *yāʾ* to mark the long vowels *ā*, *ū* and *ī* respectively. The Quran is also the first written Arabic text to indicate a shift in the pronunciation of the feminine ending from *-at* to *-ah*, although it had not yet been fully completed by the time the Quran was written down (Van Putten 2019:275–78).

Diacritical signs to distinguish similar letters, indicate the gemination of consonants, or the hiatus of vowels had been in use before, albeit inconsistently (Déroche 2014:20–21). From the late 7th century onwards, however, the Arabic script went through a process of standardization. Eventually, the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (d. 705) further standardized orthographic practices during his bureaucratic reforms, which marked widespread implementation of the Arabic script as it is known today (Versteegh 2014:65).

2.5.2. Phonology

This section discusses the phonology of Arabic and mostly follows the description found in modern grammars of Classical Arabic. The phonological system of Proto-Arabic was likely rather similar to that of Classical Arabic, consisting of 28 consonants and three vowels, /a/, /i/, and /u/, and thus represents a rather conservative Semitic language. The main phonological innovation of Proto-Arabic is the merger of the sibilants /s¹/ and /s³/.

2.5.2.1. Consonants

Both dialectological research and recent philological investigations have complicated the view of Arabic's historical phonology. In particular, the phonetic realization of some Proto-Semitic consonants has shifted in Classical Arabic pronunciation but is preserved in certain dialects of Arabic (see table 11, below).

For example, the Proto-Semitic voiced velar stop [g] shifted to a palatal in Classical Arabic, but its velar pronunciation is still attested in both Egyptian and

Yemeni varieties of Arabic. Similarly, certain dialects spoken near the Yemeni-Saudi border reflect the realization of Old Arabic /t̤s̤/ as a sequence /st/, whereas Classical Arabic *ṣad* is usually pronounced as a velarized sibilant (i.e., /s̤/).

Table 11: Reconstructed pronunciation of several consonants in Central Semitic, Old, and Classical Arabic

Central Semitic	Old Arabic	Classical Arabic
/d̤/ [k̤ʰ]	/d̤/ [k̤ʰ]	/d̤/ [ðʰ]
/g/ [g]	/g/ [g] (Cairene Arabic, Southwest Yemen)	/ǧ/ [ʒ]
/s̤/ [t̤s̤]	/s̤/ [t̤s̤] (Yemen [st])	/s̤/ [s̤]
/q/ [k̤ʰ]	/q/ [k̤ʰ]	/q/ [q]

Furthermore, the historical evidence suggests that the proto-(Central-)Semitic pronunciation of **p* as [p] was maintained in Proto-Arabic, and perhaps in some varieties of Old Arabic as well. There are several Middle Iranian loans in the Quranic text containing a *p* that are spelled with Arabic *f*, for example *firdaws*, “heaven”, which is derived from an Iranian noun (compare Avestan *pairi-daēza*), possibly entering Arabic through Greek *parádeisos*, eventually (Cheung 2017: 330). Arabic names written in Greek letters too, suggest that Central Semitic *p* was probably still pronounced as a stop [p] or [p^h] during the late pre-Islamic period. The sound change /p/ to /f/ probably occurred at a later stage in the development in Arabic (Al-Jallad 2015a).

The pronunciation of the consonant *g* (*ǧīm*) as voiced palato-alveolar affricate [d̤ʒ] likely postdates the early Islamic period and was probably originally pronounced as a palatal stop [g]. Latin and Greek transcriptions of Arabic words containing a *g* are similarly transcribed with Latin *g* and Greek *gamma*, suggesting that *g* continued to be a stop throughout the late pre-Islamic period (Al-Jallad 2015b:20–21). This pronunciation is also attested in several South Arabian Arabic dialects (Behnstedt 2016:6–7).

The proto-Semitic consonant *ḏ* was originally pronounced as a lateralized fricative¹⁵⁴ and likely retained this pronunciation in many varieties of Arabic up until at least the 10th century AD.¹⁵⁵ The lateral pronunciation of *ḏ* is also found in some dialects spoken in South Arabia. This includes several dialects spoken between Aden, Dathina and Hadramawt, where the pronunciation of *ḏ* shifts between two allophones: the ‘dark l’ [l̤] and the pharyngealized voiced interdental fricative [ðʰ]. Evidence for the lateral pronunciation of the *ḏ* exists in some dialects of the Asir region in southwestern Saudi-Arabia (Behnstedt 2016:16–18).

¹⁵⁴ Akkadian cuneiform texts, dating between 2500 to 500 BC, confirm this, as they spell the name of the Arabian deity Ruḏaw as *ru-ul-da-a-u* (Versteegh 2014:24)

¹⁵⁵ Evidence for the lateral pronunciation in medieval Arabic can be seen in loanwords from a variety of languages with which Arabic was in contact. Examples include Spanish *alcalde* “mayor” (< *al-qāḏī*, “the judge”), Tamil *parulu*, “duty” (< *farḏ*) and Indonesian *hadlir*, “present” (< *ḥāḏir*) (Versteegh 2014:23–24)

Proto-Semitic ς is usually reconstructed as a glottalized affricate [tʰs̠], and represents the glottalized counterpart of s³ (Kogan 2011:61–62). The pronunciation of ς as an affricate was retained in Hebrew and Gəʕəz but came to be pronounced as a glottalized sibilant in Classical Arabic [s̠⁴]. The deaffrication of Arabic ς may not have occurred in Proto-Arabic, as several Persian and Coptic loanwords with \check{c} are represented in Arabic with ς (Steiner 1982:75–81). Furthermore, several dialects in northwestern Yemen and southwestern Saudi Arabia reflect a pronunciation of ς as [st] (Behnstedt 2016:14; Watson et al. 2006:37).

2.5.2.2. Vowels

Proto-Arabic likely possessed three vowels: *a*, *i*, and *u*, which have corresponding long forms, \bar{a} , \bar{i} and \bar{u} . The raising of the vowel \bar{a} to \bar{e} (occasionally diphthongizing into /ie/) is attested in many Arabic vernaculars,¹⁵⁶ is used in various Quranic recitations (*qiraʔāt*) and was also described by many Classical grammarians, who refer to this process as *imāla*, “raising” (Owens 2009:197–210). Generally, this process is seen as allophonic, but Van Putten established that the language of the Quran phonemically distinguished \bar{e} and \bar{a} : the Proto-Arabic triphthongs *aya* and *ayu* collapsed into \bar{e} , whereas *awa* and *awu* collapsed into \bar{a} (Van Putten 2017).

Although this triphthong collapsed in Quranic and Classical Arabic, it was preserved in some varieties of Old Arabic, specifically in the language of the Safaitic inscriptions.¹⁵⁷ For example, the verb *ʔatawa (cf. Classical Arabic ʔatā) is attested in Safaitic as ʔtw, suggesting that word-final triphthongs were fully retained (Al-Jallad 2017a). At the same time, there is some evidence both for the retention and occasional collapse of triphthongs occurring in the case of the second root, e.g., both ʕyd and ʕd, “he returned”, suggesting that this process may have begun in an early stage of Arabic (Al-Jallad 2015a:47).

2.5.3. Morphology

2.5.3.1. Gender

Like the other Semitic languages, Arabic has two genders: masculine and feminine. Feminine gender is generally marked by the suffixed *-at*.¹⁵⁸ And like the other Semitic languages, there are many feminine nouns that are unmarked. These usually fall into one of the following categories: nouns whose biological referent is naturally feminine; parts of the body (especially occurring in pairs); inanimate objects and abstract concepts; plurals of non-humans and collectives of humans (Retsö 2011:799).

¹⁵⁶ As well as common pronunciations of Classical and Modern Standard Arabic.

¹⁵⁷ Triphthongs are attested for Geʕez (see 2.4.4.).

¹⁵⁸ The Proto-Semitic ending *-t* is retained in a very small number of nouns, e.g., *bintun*, “girl”; *ʔuhtun*, “sister”.

The Classical Arabic pausal pronunciation of the feminine ending is *-a(h)*, while the pronunciation *-at(V)* is retained in construct state and when case endings are pronounced. Quranic orthograph, which mostly writes the feminine ending with the same glyph that represents *h* indicates that this shift had begun in a pre-Classical stage of Arabic. At the same time, the spelling of certain grammatically feminine words with *t* indicates that during this shift had not yet been completed at the time of the Quran's recension (Van Putten 2017).¹⁵⁹

There is some evidence that the sound change *-at* to *-ah* did not occur in all varieties of Old Arabic, however. For example, the feminine ending is always spelled with *t* in the Safaitic inscriptions, and the early grammarians note that that in at least several pre-Islamic dialects, the feminine ending was pronounced as *-at*. This is also apparently confirmed by the Graeco-Arabic inscriptions (Al-Jallad 2015a:349, 2017b:325; Rabin 1951:205–6). However, by the early Islamic period, the pronunciation of the feminine ending had shifted to *-ah* in (almost) all forms of Arabic, with the likely exception of some variants spoken in South Arabia.

Nowadays, the only area where the pronunciation of the feminine ending *-Vt* in both the determinate and construct state still occurs, lies directly to the south-east of Ġabal Fayfāʿ, between the Saudi Arabian border and the city of Ṣaʿdah (Behnstedt 2016:50–51; Watson et al. 2006:37–38).

2.5.3.2. Number

There are three numbers in Arabic: singular, dual, and plural. Due to its limitations, not all numbers attested in Classical Arabic are also attested in the epigraphic corpora. The dual in particular is poorly attested in the epigraphic material.

2.5.3.3. Pronouns

Personal pronouns are inflected for three numbers (singular, dual, and plural) and two genders (masculine and feminine). For reference, table 12 shows the independent and clitic personal pronouns as found in modern Classical Arabic.

In Proto-Arabic, the independent personal pronouns lost the original demonstrative function attested in other Semitic languages (Al-Jallad 2017b:319).¹⁶⁰ They are only rarely attested in the pre-Islamic Arabic epigraphy (Al-Jallad 2019); clitic personal pronouns appear more frequently. Due to orthographic limitations, it is difficult to establish the quality or quantity of the vowel of this clitic pronouns.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ See also the discussion on Arabic orthography (2.5.1).

¹⁶⁰ The dual function of the third person independent pronouns as demonstratives was retained, for example, in Akkadian (Gelb 1961:132) as well in Sabaic (2.2.4.3) and Gəʿəz (2.4.3.3).

¹⁶¹ Arabic texts in Greek letters imply that the vowel of the 3rd person masculine clitic pronoun was short, either *-Vh* (in the Levant) or *-hu* (in the Damascus papyrus fragment) (Al-Jallad 2015:53; Al-Jallad and Vollandt 2020:25–26). According to the Arabic grammarians, a similar process of shortening the 3rd person masculine clitic pronoun occurred several pre-Islamic Arabic dialects. This apocopated form was possibly retained in Quranic Arabic (Van Putten 2022:196–198).

Table 12: Independent pronouns and pronominal suffixes in Classical Arabic

	SG.		DL.		PL.	
3.M.	<i>huwa</i>	<i>-hū/-hī</i> ¹⁶²	<i>humā</i>	<i>-humā</i>	<i>hum</i>	<i>-hum/-him</i>
3.F.	<i>hiya</i>	<i>-hā</i>	–		<i>hunna</i>	<i>-hunna/-hinna</i>
2.M.	<i>ʔanta</i>	<i>-ka</i>	<i>ʔantum</i>	<i>-kumā</i>	<i>ʔantum</i>	<i>-kum</i>
2.F.	<i>ʔanti</i>	<i>-ki</i>	–		<i>ʔantunna</i>	<i>-kunna</i>
1.C.	<i>ʔanā</i>	<i>-ī/hī</i> ¹⁶³	–		<i>naḥnu</i>	<i>-nā</i>

In some varieties of Classical Arabic, the 3rd person singular, dual and plural masculine singular pronominal endings are affected by vowel harmony. When these pronominal endings are preceded by the vowel *i*, the vowel of these clitics becomes *i* as well, resulting in the forms *-hum/-him*; *-hunna/-hinna*; *humā/-himā*; *-hu/-hi*. The Arab grammarians describe this kind of vowel harmony as a feature typical to eastern dialects. Some of these dialects are described to have had vowel harmony in the conjunctions *fa-* and *wa-*, which are pronounced as *fi-* and *wi-* when followed by a syllable containing an *i* (Rabin 1951:99).

2.5.3.4. The definite article

In Classical Arabic and most contemporary Arabic dialects the definite article is *al-*.¹⁶⁴ This definite article exhibits assimilation when the noun it determines starts with a coronal consonant. In the Arabic grammatical tradition, the consonants that display this kind of assimilation are referred to as *ḥurūf šamsiyya* (“sun letters”).

The pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions display a greater degree of variety of the definite article. Apart from the aforementioned *ʔal-*, the definite articles *ʔ-*, *h-*, *hn-* and *∅-* are also attested (Al-Jallad 2019:343). The early Muslim lexicographers recognized the existence of a nasal definite article *ʔam-* and saw it as a typically South Arabian feature. The definite article *ʔam-* remains in use South Arabia to this day (Heselwood and Watson 2013; Rabin 1951). The dominance of the definite article *ʔal-* can likely be attributed to its presence in Hijazi Arabic.

¹⁶² The long vowel of the 3rd person masculine is shortened when preceded by a heavy syllable, e.g., *baytu-hū*, “his house”; but *min-hu*, “from him”.

¹⁶³ The clitic pronoun of the 1st person singular is *-ī* when preceded by a noun, but *-nī* when preceded by a verb.

¹⁶⁴ The realization of the definite article varies from dialect to dialect, ranging from *al-* to *il-* to *əl-*. In Maghrebi Arabic dialects, the allomorphic variant *li/lə* is also attested if a noun starts with two consonants (e.g., Tunis Arabic *ir-rāzil*, ‘the man’ vs *li-rzāl*, ‘the men’ (Gibson 2011:566)).

2.5.3.5. Case and state

There are three cases and states in Classical Arabic. Although case is a salient feature in Classical Arabic, there is no evidence of (productive) case in any of the Arabic dialects. However, there is little doubt that case existed in Proto-Arabic.¹⁶⁵

In the singular, Classical Arabic productively distinguishes three cases: nominative, genitive and accusative. In the plural, the genitive and accusative coalesced, leading to a nominative-oblique distinction. The Proto-Semitic locative *-u* is retained in a few expressions, e.g., *qablu*, ‘before’; *baʿdu*, ‘afterward’.

Broadly speaking, the nominative is used to express both subject and predicate in non-verbal clauses (e.g., *al-maliku kabīrun*, “the king is great”); the subject in active verbal clauses (*ḍaraba l-maliku*, “the king struck”) or the direct object in passive verbal clauses (*kuṭiba kitābun*, “a book was written”). The genitive is used primarily to mark the second member in the construct state (*kitābu l-maliki*, “the book of the king”) and nouns occurring after (nearly) all prepositions. Finally, the accusative is primarily used to mark the direct objection in verbal clauses (*ḍaraba l-maliku l-ʿabda*, “the king struck the servant”) and all adverbs (*ḍahaba sarīʿan*, “he went quickly”).

Classical Arabic possess three states: indeterminate, determinate, and construct states. A noun in the indeterminate state is marked by a case vowel and a suffixed nasal consonant. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as *nunation* (e.g., *malik-u-n*, king-NOM-INDEF., “a king”). Nunation is also attested in a variety of contemporary Arabic dialects, although its relation to the system of the marking of the indeterminate state in Classical Arabic remains unclear (Stokes 2017:227–32).¹⁶⁶

A noun in the determinate state is marked by the loss of nunation and occurs most often with the definite article (e.g., *al-maliku*, “the king”), but also with the vocative particle *yā* (e.g., *yā maliku*, “o, king”) or following the absolute negation *lā*, ‘there is no’ (e.g., *lā ʾilāha*, “there is no God”).

In the construct state, the head noun is marked by the loss of nunation. Most frequently, the second member of a construct state is a noun, in which case it takes the genitive case, e.g., *māliku baytin*, “the king of a house”; *ṣāhibu l-dāri*, “master of the house”. Less frequently, the second member of the construct state can also be a verbal clause (e.g., *ʾamru mā taḥḍuru*, “the case which you avoid”) (Retsö 2011:802).

¹⁶⁵ The existence of case in Proto-Arabic (and Proto-Semitic) was cast into doubt by Owens, who suggested that the development of case in Akkadian and Classical Arabic reflect parallel innovations (2009:83–86). However, Al-Jallad and Van Putten (2017) responded to most of Owens’ claims.

¹⁶⁶ In his excellent dissertation, Stokes argues against a ‘monogenetic’ interpretation of dialectal nunation to explain its occurrence in all of the Arabic dialects. In several dialects, Stokes notes that dialectal nunation may go back to the demonstrative *han*, occurring in post-nominal suffixes in some early Arabic dialects (Stokes 2017:224)

2.5.3.6. Nominal morphology

The nominal system of Arabic represents one of the more extensive and conservative systems of Semitic. Nouns are declined for two genders (masculine and feminine); three numbers (singular, dual, and plural). The high number of nominal derivational patterns in Classical Arabic is likely the result of the later incorporation of material from many different pre-Islamic Arabic dialects, particularly from Central and East Arabia (Rabin 1951:22)

There are two ways of forming nominal plurals in Arabic. The external plural is characterized by a suffix, whose form further depends on gender and case; the masculine external plural is either *-ūna* or *-īna*, representing the nominative and oblique respectively. If a masculine external plural is the first member of the construct state, the nasal element is lost, i.e., *-ū ~ -ī*. The feminine external plural is characterized by the suffix *-āt*, which similarly distinguishes a nominative form *-ātu(n)* and an oblique form *-āti(n)*. Generally, the use of external plurals is limited to a set number of nominal forms.¹⁶⁷

The use of internal (broken) plurals is very common in Arabic. There is a relatively large number of possible internal plurals, not all internal plural patterns are attested with any singular noun. Furthermore, certain nouns may have more than one internal plural, which is not always clearly semantically motivated (Ratcliffe 1998; Wright 2005).

2.5.3.7. Verbal morphology

The verbal system of Classical Arabic is similarly conservative. Similar to the noun, verbs are conjugated for two genders (masculine and feminine) and three numbers (singular, dual, and plural).

There are two systems of verbal conjugation: a prefix- and suffix conjugation. The suffix conjugation primarily expresses past tense, although it can also express the optative mood. The prefix conjugation can express both the present and future tense as well as the indicative, subjunctive and jussive moods, which are marked with various vowel endings or lack thereof. Several varieties of Arabic also express the energetic mood, which is characterized by a nasal suffix i.e., *-an(na)*.¹⁶⁸

Classical Arabic distinguishes an active and passive voice.¹⁶⁹ The passive voice is formed through internal modification of the verbal pattern (apophony), for example *kataba* (active) vs *kutiba* (passive). In most Arabic dialects the passive

¹⁶⁷ Obligatory use of the external plural in (Classical) Arabic is mostly restricted to diminutives, the adjectival form (*nisba*), participles and nominal forms of derived verb stems and agent nouns with the pattern CaCCāC (Birstiel 2019:380).

¹⁶⁸ The energetic mood is attested in pre-Islamic poetry, Quranic and Classical Arabic and has parallels in Biblical Hebrew (Edzard 2011:498). It is possible that the n-morphemes attested in Ugaritic and the so-called ‘long prefix-conjugation’ in Epigraphic South Arabian are related to the energetic, but this remains unclear (Pardee 2019:466).

¹⁶⁹ Middle voice is also attested and are typically marked by the vocalic pattern *faʿila* or *faʿula*, e.g., *saʿuda*, ‘to be blessed’; *fariha*, ‘to be glad’ (Ajer 2015:8–9).

voice is expressed adjectivally or through the use of periphrasis (Retsö 1983:21–30), although the internal passive is attested in several dialects of the Arabian Peninsula (Davey 2016:152).

Furthermore, Classical Arabic possesses one of the largest systems of verbal stems in the Semitic languages. In total there are fifteen such stems, although only the first ten are regularly attested. Traditionally these are referred to with the Latin numerals I to X(V). Most of these verbal stems can be linked to the verbal stems of other Semitic languages, with the Arabic stems I to IV corresponding to the G-, D-, L- and C-stems found in other Semitic languages and stems VIII, V, VI, and X generally expressing the reflexive or passive of the first four. Other stems are innovations; for example, stems IX (*ifʿalla*) and XI (*ifʿālla*) are derived from the nominal pattern *aCCaC* and are used only to describe colors, defects, and other visual characteristics (Birnstiel 2019). It is worth noting that many of these verbs have been completely lexicalized and in most cases the derived stems are no longer productive (Kász 2015:347)¹⁷⁰

2.5.4. Syntax

2.5.4.1. Agreement

Syntactical agreement in Classical Arabic has been the subject of many studies, and was treated by Reckendorf (1895), Wright (1896). Seeing how an in-depth study dedicated to this subject was only recently published (Bettega and D’Anna 2023), this section will present a brief summary of agreement in Arabic.

The main factors influencing agreement in Arabic are animacy and word order. Associated words, including demonstrative, relative and personal pronouns, adjectives, and verbs must agree with the noun in number and gender (and in Classical Arabic case).

Like in the other Semitic languages, in Classical Arabic associated words must agree with the noun in number, gender and case in nominal phrases, and number and gender in verbal phrases. In nominal phrases, the degree of agreement depends on animacy; in verbal phrases, agreement depends on animacy and word order (Bettega and D’Anna 2023:166–67)

Animate and inanimate nouns tend to function differently in terms of syntax. Animate nouns tend to take full agreement in number, gender, and case, for example, *riġālun kibārūn*, “big men”; *nisāʾu karīmātun*, “generous women”. On the other hand, non-human plural nouns tend to take feminine singular agreement. Examples include regardless of the noun’s grammatical gender e.g., *kalbun ʾamīn*, “a loyal dog”; *kilābun ʾamīnatun*, “loyal dogs” (Retsö 2011:800).

However, this system is far from stable, and appears to not have fully crystallized in pre-Classical Arabic. Van Putten (forthcoming) recently showed that, in both the pre-Islamic *muʿallaqāt* poems as well as in the Qurʾān, partial agreement

¹⁷⁰ For example, for many verbs the G-stem (I), the causative (IV) and reflexive (VIII) stems have coalesced.

is mostly limited to pronouns, whereas verbs and adjectives display full agreement. Interestingly, the contemporary dialects of Arabic which retain masculine and feminine distinctions in the plural follow the same system. This indicates that as a syntactic phenomenon, asymmetric agreement is restricted to Classical Arabic.

2.5.4.2. Negation

The negation strategies of Classical Arabic reflect some of its most innovative features. Existential negation is usually expressed with the negator *lā* or with the negative verb *laysa*, which is conjugated for number and gender. It is possible that the negator *lā* derives, through metathesis, from the West-Semitic negator *ʔal-*, initially resulting in *laʔ*, with the loss of the glottal stop leading to compensatory lengthening. The presence of the negator *laʔ* in many spoken varieties of Arabic has been interpreted as a possible archaism (Kaye 2007).¹⁷¹

The past tense in Classical Arabic is negated either through usage of the particle *mā* together with the suffix conjugation (e.g., *mā kataba*, “he did not write”)¹⁷² or the particle *lam* with the apocopate (e.g., *lam yaktub*). The negator *mā* most likely arose from an original interrogative used as a rhetorical device,¹⁷³ but was grammaticalized in Arabic to a strict negator (Sjörs 2018:232–240).

2.5.5. Particles

Arabic is further characterized by several particles that do not appear in any other Semitic language. These include the subordinating conjunction *hattā*, “up to”,¹⁷⁴ the locative *ʿinda*, “by; around” and the ablative *ʿan*, “(away) from; about” (Al-Jallad 2018:7, 18–20)

The preverbal particle *qad* is likely derived from a grammaticalization of the verb *qadama*, “to proceed” (Huehnergard 2017:21). In Classical Arabic, it may mark either the pluperfect (with the suffix-conjugation, e.g., *qad waṣala*, “he has arrived”) or potential modality (with the prefix conjugation, e.g., *qad yaktubu* “he may write”). Both usages of this particle are attested in early Arabic varieties, including Quranic and Classical Arabic, and are retained in several Yemeni Arabic dialects (Behnstedt and Woidich 2021:388–89; Vanhove 1996:244–248; Watson 1993:52).

¹⁷¹ But see contra Pat-El (2017:443), who argues that while Kaye is correct in his assessment that ‘Classical Arabic is not the ancestor of the modern dialects’, disagrees that the negator *lāʔ* with the glottal stop is an example of a proto-Arabic archaism retained in the dialects.

¹⁷² Less commonly, the negative particle *lā* can also be used with the suffix conjugation, apparently in the same meaning. The attestations and possible semantic motivations of *lā* with the suffix conjugation is discussed in more detail by Sjörs (Sjörs 2018:237, f.28)

¹⁷³ A similar rhetorical device is attested, for example, in the Hebrew Bible; however, as Al-Jallad points out, only Arabic further grammaticalized this into a negator (Al-Jallad 2017b:319).

¹⁷⁴ This most likely reflects a grammaticalization of the noun *ḥadd*, “border; limit” and the conjunction *-tay* (Al-Jallad 2018). A similar process occurred in the case of Minaic *sʔn*, which also means ‘border’ (compare Arabic *sanna*, “to prescribe”).

2.5.6. Lexicon

The Arabic lexicon is both the largest extant and best described of all the Semitic languages. The earliest evidence of Arabic lexemes date from the pre-Islamic period and are attested primarily in the epigraphical corpora. The Safaitic corpus in particular, contains many items that are also found in the later Classical Arabic dictionaries, but nevertheless displays lexical isoglosses shared with either Northwest Semitic or contemporary Levantine Arabic dialects (Al-Jallad 2019:363).

Old Arabic is also attested in the form of pre-Islamic poetry, which was recorded in the early Abbasid period. Although the degree to which the pre-Islamic poems were subject to later redaction is controversial,¹⁷⁵ the lexical items found therein represent an archaic, pre-Classical stage of Arabic.¹⁷⁶

Naturally the Quran became a source of lexical information and philological study for later scholars. Much Quranic religious vocabulary was derived from Syriac and Aramaic, either directly or through intermediaries such as (late) Sabaic and Gəʿəz. Other terms also found in the Quran, pertaining to notions of social organization and religion were derived from Middle Persian.¹⁷⁷

Arabic lexicography as a systematic field of study arose in the 2nd/8th century. The Arabic scholars of this period were predominantly interested in collecting as much linguistic data as possible. This usually involved gathering information from desert dwelling Bedouin (*ʿaʿrāb*), who were considered to speak the best kind of Arabic (*al-fuṣḥā*) (Versteegh 2014:71–72).¹⁷⁸ The lexemes collected from their informants were then classified on the basis of subject/topic or arranged based on their root consonants.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ The most radical thesis as presented in Margoliouth's "The Origins of Arabic Poetry" (1925) and Taha Husayn's *fi l-šīʿr al-ǧāhili* (1926) claims that pre-Islamic poetry consists of later fabrications has been rejected. Although doubts about the authenticity of the pre-Islamic poetic corpus have persisted afterwards, the scholarly consensus has rejected the notion that they were Abbasid period forgeries (Bauer 2010:701).

¹⁷⁶ One particular feature of the pre-Islamic poetic corpora is the creation of neologisms based on affixes no longer productive in Classical Arabic. Citing Ullmann, Versteegh (2014:71) gives the examples *ʿadlamu*, 'very black' to form *idlahamma*, 'to be/become very black'; *islanṭaha*, 'to be wide' from *saṭaha*, 'to expand'.

¹⁷⁷ The idea that Quranic vocabulary was (heavily) influenced by Syriac and Aramaic terminology has occasionally been used to suggest that the Prophet Muhammad took these concepts wholesale from Aramaic and Syriac sources (Jeffery 2007:38–9).

¹⁷⁸ From the Umayyad period onwards, the notion developed that the best Arabic was spoken by nomadic Arabic-speakers that never became sedentary. The early Islamic grammarians often stressed that their statements were confirmed by Bedouin informants. The degree to which this reflects the actual situation on the ground is impossible to determine. Some anecdotes suggest that at least some Bedouin informants were susceptible to both bribery and political interference, which further casts into doubt the veracity of their statements.

¹⁷⁹ As Baalbeki points out, several scholars between the 2nd/8th to 5th/11th centuries produced lexicographical works both on a topic-subject basis (referred to as *mubawwab*) and on a root-arrangement basis (referred to as *muǧannas*). Although the *muǧannas*-type dictionaries would eventually become the dominant type of lexicographical work, the last scholar that Baalbeki mentions to produce both *mubawwab* and *muǧannas* type works was Ibn Sīda (d. 458/1066).

The activity of the lexicographers resulted in the massive collection of Arabic lexemes, some of which were associated with the speech (*luġa*) of particular pre-Islamic Arabic tribes.¹⁸⁰ In the centuries following, Arabic dictionaries would become ever more expansive, culminating with Zabīdī's *Tāġ al-ʿarūs*, which was completed in 1188/1774 (Baalbaki 2014:397–98).¹⁸¹

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¹⁸⁰ Versteegh gives the example of the minimal pairs *ħusn* ~ *ħusun*, with the presence of the epenthetic vowel occurring only in 'western' Arabic dialects (Versteegh 2014:47).

¹⁸¹ The edition of *Tāġ al-ʿarūs* edited by Farrāġ consists of 40 volumes containing nearly 12 000 roots. This is over three thousand more than Ibn Manzūr's *Lisān al-ʿArab*, which is nevertheless more expansive on account of the depth of its explanations (Baalbaki 2014:386, 397).

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2.6. Discussion

The chapter has given a general outline of the most relevant grammatical and syntactical features of the languages of South Arabia. It is clear that many of the features found in these languages are very similar to one another. In some cases, these similarities can be attributed to shared retentions going back to an earlier stage of Semitic.¹⁸² In other cases, similarities may have arisen through parallel analogic developments.¹⁸³

For example, when comparing the forms of the suffix conjugation of the 1st and 2nd person singular, it is clear that most South Arabian languages have a suffixed *-k*. The notable exception here is Classical Arabic. This would suggest that the suffix conjugation was originally marked with a *-k[V]* and that the Classical Arabic form represents a proto-Arabic innovation.

Table 13: The 1st and 2nd suffix conjugation in the languages of South Arabia

	Sabaic	MSA (Mehri)	Gəʿəz	(Classical) Arabic
2.M	<i>qtl-k</i>	<i>kis-k</i>	<i>nagara-ka</i>	<i>qatal-ta</i>
2.F	<i>qtl-k</i>	<i>kis-š</i>	<i>nagar-ki</i>	<i>qatal-ti</i>
1.C	<i>qtl-k</i>	<i>kis-k</i>	<i>nagar-ku</i>	<i>qatal-tu</i>

However, considering the presence of South Arabian Arabic dialects that similarly possess a *-k* in the suffix conjugation, this would imply that these Arabic dialects are more conservative, and that the *k*-based suffix conjugation was also present in proto-Arabic.

This example is purely rhetorical. Comparative evidence from other Semitic languages, such as Akkadian and Ugaritic, both of which are attested much earlier than any of the South Arabian languages, demonstrates that the Proto-Semitic suffix conjugation was marked by a *-k* in the 2nd person and a *-t* in the 1st person. This distribution was likely retained in Proto-West Semitic but came to be levelled to either *-k* or *-t* in various West Semitic languages. This resulted in the following distribution:

¹⁸² As discussed under the header of typological similarities (2.1.)

¹⁸³ A possible example of is this is the presence of the *k*-based 1st and 2nd person suffix conjugation, attested in Sabaic (and the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages), Modern South Arabian, and Ethio-Semitic. This is discussed in more detail in 3.2.1.

Table 14: The 1st and 2nd suffix conjugation in the Semitic languages

	Proto-Semitic	Akkadian	Ugaritic	Classical Arabic	Gəʕəz	Sabaic
2M	*-ta	<i>zikaṛā-ta</i>	<i>mlk-t</i> (*malak-ta)	<i>qatal-ta</i>	<i>ḵatalka</i>	<i>qtl-k</i>
2F	*-ti	<i>zikaṛā-ti</i>	<i>mlk-t</i> (*malak-ti)	<i>qatal-ti</i>	<i>ḵatalki</i>	<i>qtl-k</i>
1C	*-ku	<i>zikaṛā-k</i>	<i>mlk-t</i> (*malak-tu)	<i>qatal-tu</i>	<i>ḵatalki</i>	<i>qtl-k</i>

However, such comparative linguistic information is not always present. When no such comparative material exists, it is much more difficult to determine if similar features between languages arose because they belong to the same branch of a linguistic family (shared innovations), whether they arose independently (coincidence) or whether they spread through contact. This can be particularly challenging when languages are genetically closely related (Epps, Huehnergard, and Pat-El 2013:213).

A case in point is the merger of the sibilants s^1 and s^3 . This merger occurred in Gəʕəz (2.4.2) as well as in Arabic (2.5.1). Although earlier forms of Sabaic maintained a distinction between s^1 and s^3 , the Late Sabaic linguistic evidence indicates that this process also occurred in Late Sabaic. As a shared innovation can be ruled out, the question should be whether the merger of the two sibilants can be ascribed to an independent development or whether it was the result of contact with either Gəʕəz or Arabic.¹⁸⁴

The issue of which features were spread through contact rather than shared retentions or the result of independent innovations will be addressed in the following chapter, which addresses the most important aspects of language contact in late antique South Arabia.

¹⁸⁴ The merging of different sibilants is attested throughout all Semitic languages, often resulting in different outcomes. For example, in opposition to the aforementioned cases, Akkadian and Ugaritic merged s^1 and s^2 . The same process also occurred in Hebrew, where the original distinction between *šm* and *śm* is only marked orthographically.

CHAPTER 3:

Language contact in late antique South Arabia

The previous chapter gave an outline of the various languages of South Arabia during the late antique period, together with their most relevant features. Several of these features are shared between all or some of these languages, although it is not always self-evident whether or not similarities exist due to shared retention or whether they arose due to contact.

Several questions regarding language contact in South Arabia remain unanswered. Firstly, although it is apparent that Sabaic did not disappear overnight, up until which point did it remain a spoken language in the region? Secondly, at what moment did Arabic become the main vehicle for communication? Thirdly, how significant was the role of speakers of Ethiopic languages in South Arabia during the same period?

The current chapter seeks to answer such questions by focusing on linguistic contact in South Arabia during the late antique period, c. 400 – 800 AD. It seeks to pinpoint which shared linguistic features arose due to contact between the various languages of South Arabia.

This chapter is structured as follows: it consists of analyses relating to phonology (3.1.), morphology (3.2.) and syntax (3.3.). This is followed by a brief discussion of lexicon (3.4.), followed by a general summary of the chapter and its implication for our understanding of language contact in late antique South Arabia.

3.1. Phonology

3.1.1. The sound change $*p > f$

Proto-Semitic $*p$ is traditionally considered to have been pronounced as a voiceless bilabial stop [p]. This pronunciation was retained in East Semitic as well as in Northwest Semitic represented by Ugaritic, Canaanite, and Aramaic. In Hebrew and Aramaic, p has an allophonic secondary articulation f in post-vocalic position (Huehnergard and Rubin 2011:272).

The sound change $*p > f$ was traditionally seen as a “South Semitic” isogloss (Rubin 2008:83, 86). As the notion of a South Semitic genetic subbranch was abandoned, the shift of /p/ > /f/ came to be seen as an areal feature (Huehnergard and Rubin 2011:272).

Establishing when this sound change occurred is not self-evident. As Al-Jallad has pointed out, the introduction of new glyphs to in Syriac and Gəʿəz represent Greek pi [p^h] indicates that the reflex of Proto-Semitic $*p$ in these languages was not considered equivalent to Greek pi (2015:19). This would suggest that by the 4th century AD, at the latest, the sound change $*p > f$ had been completed complete in Gəʿəz.

Establishing an exact date for when this sound change occurred is not straightforward. Some epigraphic and documentary evidence exists that suggest /p/ was still pronounced as /p/ in the BC period, but had shifted to [f] by the 1st century AD:

- a. In the 3rd century BC, a member of the Minaean community in Egypt inscribed a sarcophagus containing a reference to the Egyptian deity Userhapi (< *Sarapis*), which is represented as *ʔtrf* (Sayed 1984:93).¹⁸⁵
- b. The Himyarite capital of *Zafār* (*Zfr*) is mentioned in two different Greek sources.
 - a. *Periplus Maris Erythraia* (1st century AD) represents the name as *Safar* (*Σαφαρ*) (Casson 1989:62).
 - b. The *Historia Ecclesiastica* (5th century AD) represents the name as *Tafar[on]* (*Ταφαρ[ον]*) (Philostorgius 1972:34, 2007:41).
- c. The *Periplus Maris Erythraia* also mentions the South Arabian tribal group and eponymous region *Maʿāfir* (Sabaic *mʿfr[m]*), represented therein as *Mafaritis* (*Μαφαριτις*).
- d. A local Latin inscription from the 2nd century AD refers to the “port of Farasan” (*Ferresani portus*) (Phillips, Villeneuve, and Facey 2004).

Assuming that the situation in Minaic can be taken as representative for the South Arabian languages as a whole, the original pronunciation of Proto-Semitic */p/ as a bilabial stop was retained in pre-BC period.

By the first century AD, this situation began to change. The aspirated stops [p^h], [t^h], and [k^h] of Attic Greek had become fricatives [f], [θ], and [x] in Koine Greek (Colvin 2007:67). The material found in the *Periplus Maris Erythraia* and Philostorgius’ *Historia Ecclesiastica* seemingly confirms that the sound change *p* to *f* had been completed in Sabaic by the 1st century AD. This argument is further strengthened by the Latin inscription from the Farasan islands, especially considering that Latin *f* consistently represented a fricative [f].

Early Arabic evidence further suggests that the shift *p* to *f* was an areal phenomenon. Several words borrowed from Persian containing an *p* were borrowed

¹⁸⁵ The inscription M 338 reads (translation adapted from Sayed 1984:93): *nfqn k-Zydʔl bn Zyd d-Zyrn d-wb((dwb)) d-sʔrb ʔmrrn w-qlymtn k-ʔbytt ʔlʔlt Msr b-ywmhy Tlmyt bn Tlmyt w-yfqr Zydʔl b-wrhh Hthr w-yfnnw kb bn kl ʔbytt ʔlʔlt Msr tmhh-sʔm ksʔw bwš k-syh-sʔ w-yšʔlyn-sʔbʔh-sʔ ʔd mn byt ʔlhn ʔtrhf b-wrhh Kyhk hrf ʔny w-ʔsʔry k-Tlmyt mlkn w-rtid Zyd gmnsʔ((lmn-sʔ)) w-nfq-sʔ ʔtrhf w-ʔlʔlt ʔm-sʔ b-mhrmh-sʔ (ʔ)*, “This is the sarcophagus of Zaydʔl, son of Zayd of the clan Zyrn, the purified one, who imported myrrh and calamus for the temples of the gods of Egypt in the days of Ptolemy son of Ptolemy and Zaydʔl died in the month Ḥaṭḥur and was sent *kouphi* from all the temples of the gods of Egypt and was presented with linen coverings for his (funerary) boat, and he was raised up by his mourners to the port of the temple of the god Osiris-Apis in the month Kayḥak of the 22nd year of the Ptolemy the king; and Zaydʔl consecrated his mummy (?) and his sarcophagus to Osiris-Apis and his associated gods in his sanctuary”.

into Arabic with /f/ (e.g., *firdaws* < *paradēisos*; *fars* < *pars* (Al-Jallad 2015b:19). However, by the time of the composition of the Damascus Psalm fragment in the 9th century AD, the shift of *p* to *f* had been completed in Arabic as well (Al-Jallad and Vollandt 2020:55–56).

To summarize, the epigraphic and documentary evidence shows that proto-(Central-)Semitic *p* continued to be pronounced as a stop in the BC period. The first evidence for a change into a fricative *f* in South Arabia dates to the 1st century AD, after which this pronunciation spread further northwards in the following centuries.

3.1.2. Assimilation of the nasal *n*

The progressive assimilation of *n* is a feature that is attested in many different Semitic languages. It is found in Northwest Semitic languages, as well as in some varieties of Ancient North Arabian (Gzella 2011b:426; Udine 2011).

From the Middle Sabaic period onwards, the nasal consonant *n* consistently displays assimilation to a following consonant (2.2.3.). This can be seen both in the case of inherited lexemes (for example, *ʔsʾ* < *ʔnʔsʾ*, “souls”; *bt* < *bnt*, “daughter”; *ʔtt* < *ʔntt*, “female; feminine” (Stein 2003:19), as well as in the representation of foreign names and borrowings. Examples include *Mdrn* < *al-Mundir*¹⁸⁶; *Mdbn*, “al-Mandab”.¹⁸⁷

As Stein points out, this phenomenon is typical for the inscriptions of the central Sabaeen cultural area, meaning the region around Marib and the central South Arabian highlands. At the same time, it is almost unattested in the southwestern Radmanite and northern Haramic inscriptions (Stein 2003:20–21). From the Late Sabaic period onwards, nasal assimilation is attested throughout the entire South Arabian linguistic area.

Earlier and contemporaneous epigraphic evidence suggests nasal assimilation may have been a broader phenomenon present across the Arabian Peninsula, with evidence for systematic assimilation becoming stronger further south. For example, whereas the Safaitic corpus attests to the inconsistent assimilation of nasal consonants, it is apparently fully consistent in Dadanitic (Al-Jallad 2015a:51; Kootstra 2019:71). A possible example of inconsistent full anticipatory nasal assimilation in Quranic Arabic is attested in the form *nuḡḡī* < *nunḡī* (Van Putten 2022:268). Furthermore, Al-Jallad (forthcoming) interprets the phrase *mʔdlk* attested in the Ḡabal Dabūb inscription as reflecting assimilation of the preposition *min* with the noun *faḍl* (followed by the pronominal suffix *-k*), e.g., *mif-faḍli-ka* (**min faḍli-ka*).¹⁸⁸ If this were the case, this would suggest that anticipatory nasal assimilation remained productive in South Arabia around the beginning of the Islamic period.

¹⁸⁶ Also note the representation of the Arabic prefixed definite article with the Sabaic suffixed definite article, which is also discussed below (4.2.3.1.).

¹⁸⁷ Ja 1028-4: [...] *w-tʔnʔ sʾsʾltn Mdbn*, ‘and he strengthened the chain of Mandab’.

¹⁸⁸ This would be more-or-less identical to the behavior of the definite article in Hebrew, which displays a similar form of assimilation (e.g., *hay-yod*, “the hand”) (Pat-El 2009:20).

Medieval authors note the existence of the form *mil* as a contraction of **min al-*, “from the...”. As Rabin points out, this system was attested particularly in the extreme points of the Arabian Peninsula, such as Aleppo, Oman, northern Yemen (Rabin 1951:72–73). In this light, it is possible that the process of nasal assimilation, once widely attested and common across the Arabian Peninsula, gradually died out and was retained only in more remote linguistic varieties.

Strengthening this notion is the fact that nasal assimilation is still attested in several contemporary varieties of Arabic spoken in South Arabia. In the dialect of Jabal Rāziḥ, spoken in southwestern Saudi Arabia, the nasal consonant *n* is completely assimilated to any following consonant, for example, perf. *nagal* > imperf. *yiggul*, “to extract” (Watson et al. 2006:37). A similar phenomenon is attested in the dialects of Jibal Faifa, spoken in the eastern parts of the Jazan province of Saudi-Arabia (Alfaife 2018:5657; Behnstedt 1987:189). Further areal evidence for the assimilation of nasal consonants is the behavior of some nouns in Omani Mehri and Šḥeri, as in the words *ḵannitt* < **kannant* “small” (F.SG); *tēt* < **intēt* “woman”.

3.1.3. The merger of the sibilants *s*¹ and *s*³

Proto-Semitic originally possessed three different non-emphatic sibilants. Depending on the academic tradition, these sibilants may be represented in various ways. For reasons of clarity, I will maintain the most neutral system of transcription by referring to these sibilants as *s*¹, *s*² and *s*³ respectively.¹⁸⁹

Table 15: The sibilants in various Semitic languages

Proto-Semitic pronunciation	Traditional transcription	Sabaic	Arabic	Mehri (MSA)	Hebrew
[ʃ] (or [s])	š	s ¹	س [s]	s / h	שׁ
[ʃ̣]	ś	s ²	ش [š]	ʃ	שׂ
[ts]	s	s ³	س [s]	s	ס

¹⁸⁹ The phonetic realization of the sibilants in Sabaic and the other Epigraphic South Arabian languages is uncertain. The debate mostly revolves around the question whether *s*¹ was pronounced as a hushed or a hissed sibilant (i.e. [s] or [ʃ]), with arguments both in favor and against either suggestion. On the one hand, early Sabaic inscriptions from Ethiopia indicate a merger of the interdental *ṭ* and *ḍ* with *s*¹ and *z*, respectively. Crosslinguistic evidence suggests that the merger of [θ] with a hissed [s] is more common than with a hushed [ʃ]. However, two Middle Sabaic inscriptions represent the Greek name Seleukos as /s¹lky/. At the same time, certain foreign onomastics with a plain sibilant [s] are represented in several Epigraphic South Arabian languages, particularly Minaic, with /ṭ/; e.g., *dḷṭ* (< *Dēlos*); *tlmyṭ* (< *Ptolemaios*); *ʔtrhf* (< *ʔUserhapi*). This would suggest that the /ṭ/ may have been phonetically closest to the Greek sibilant [s].

In South Arabia, the distinction between all three sibilants was retained in Sabaic, at least up until the late period, as well as in Modern South Arabian, although they have undergone certain sound changes in the latter. The merger of s^1 and s^3 is posited for proto-Ethiopic¹⁹⁰ as well as Arabic (see table 15).

In Sabaic, all three sibilants are distinguished up until the Late Sabaic period (2.2.3.). A shared innovation between proto-Arabic and proto-Gəʿəz is the merger of s^1 and s^3 (2.4.2; 2.5.2). Only certain Modern South Arabian languages retain a distinction between the three sibilants, although their original pronunciation has undergone certain sound changes (2.3.2.).

Although evidence is not plentiful, there are multiple examples of the merger of s^1 with s^3 in Late Sabaic exist (Stein 2003:26–7): forms with an etymological s^3 are occasionally spelled with s^1 and vice versa (e.g., *ms¹nd* instead of *ms³nd*, “inscription”; *s¹s³lt* instead of *s¹ll/s¹lt*, “chain”) (Sima 2001:257). Similarly, some loanwords containing a sibilant are represented with either s^1 or s^3 : For example, the name Joseph, derived from Hebrew *Yōsef* is spelled as *Yws¹f* in one inscription Ja 1028, but as *Yws³f* in the inscription SR-Na⁶d 9 (Robin and Rijziger 2018:273).

It is not clear if the merger of s^1 and s^3 represented a late Sabaic independent development. The merger of consonants is attested in various Semitic languages, both inside and outside South Arabia: in both Akkadian and Ugaritic, s^1 and s^2 merged, whereas in Old Aramaic, s^1 and s^3 merged (Kogan 2011:55; Udine 2011: 566). Moreover, a similar merger can already be seen in the so-called Amiritic inscriptions from the northern edges of the South Arabian cultural area, written between the 1st century BC and the 2nd century AD.

The discussion of whether or not the merger of the sibilants in Late Sabaic is best seen as an independent development or as evidence for substrate influence will be discussed again below (4.2.2.1.).

3.1.4. Loss of the glottal stop /ʔ/

The South Arabian glyph for *ʔalif* is generally taken to have represented a glottal stop /ʔ/, although there is no direct evidence pertaining to its pronunciation in the Epigraphic South Arabian languages (Stein 2003:19). Although the spelling of words with an etymological glottal stop is generally consistent throughout the entire period in which Sabaic was attested, South Arabian loanwords and onomastics in the Arabic corpus suggest that the glottal stop was elided. The question remains whether this was the result of language-internal developments in Sabaic, or whether the glottal stop was lost after the borrowing of Sabaic terms into Arabic.

The evidence is as follows: in the widely attested South Arabian personal names *Šuraḥbīl* (< *s²rḥb²l*) and *Šarāḥīl* (*S²rḥ²l*) the *yā*⁷ represents a long vowel instead of acting as a carrier for the *hamza*. Furthermore, the early grammarian Sībawayhi (d. 180/796) lists the name *Šarāḥīl* in his discussion of the patterns

¹⁹⁰ In proto-Ethio-Semitic, the interdental *t̪* also merged with *s*. Evidence of the merger of the interdental *t̪* and *s*¹ can also be seen in the early Sabaic inscriptions from Ethiopia, for example *hḥds¹* < *hḥdt̪*, “to found”; *ʔws¹n* < *ʔwt̪n*, “idols”, as well as in Ḥaḍramitic.

mafāʿil and *mafāʿīl*, suggesting that the name was pronounced as such by the 8th century AD at the latest (Sibuwayh 1988:229). Late pre-Islamic and early Islamic papyrological and epigraphical evidence further suggests that these South Arabian names were transmitted into Arabic without the retention of the glottal stop:

The earliest piece of evidence is the Ḥarrān inscription, which dates to the year 568 AD.¹⁹¹ The other is an early Islamic epigraph from the peninsula of Knidos, now part of southwestern Turkey.¹⁹² The first inscription reads as follows (Larcher and Cassuto 2020):



Figure 2: Šarāḥīl b. Ṭālemō inscription, adapted from Schroeder (1884)

ʔnʔ šrḥyl bn ṭlmw
ʔanā Šarāḥīl bin Ṭālemō
 “I am Sārahīl, son of Ṭalem”

The second inscription, from Cnydos (the current Datça Peninsula in Southwest Turkey), reads as follows (Imbert 2013:738):

Graffito C3
ʔllhm ʔġfr l-šrḥyl bn rfyʿ ʔl[ʿk]y mn ʔhl flstyn
ʔallahumma iġfir li-šarāḥīl bin raḫīʿ l-ʿakkī min ʔahli filastīn
 “Oh Lord, forgive Šarāḥīl, son of Raḫīʿ al-ʿAkkī of the people of Palestine”.

¹⁹¹ This inscription has already received attention for being one of the earliest inscriptions written in the Arabic script (Hoyland 2008)

¹⁹² The cultural background of these inscriptions is discussed in more detail below in the section “South Arabians in early Islam” (5.3.)



Figure 3: Facsimile of graffito C3 (adapted from Imbert (2013))

Both names *Šarāḥīl* and *Šuraḥbīl* are also attested in early Islamic papyri from Egypt. In these papyri, the name *Šuraḥbīl* occurs twice (P.II.Vogl.5; P.Hamb. Arab.I), while *Šarāḥīl* occurs five times. Although most early papyri are undotted, a papyrus from the 3rd/9th century vocalizes the name entirely as *šrʿhyl* (P.Cair. Arab 282):¹⁹³

P.Cair.Arab. 282

ʿly ydy slmwn bn šrʿhīl

ʿalā yaday salmūn bin šarāḥīl

“Through Salmūn, son of Šarāḥīl”

Further onomastic evidence for the loss of the glottal stop includes the transmission of the tribal name *Ḍū Yazʿan*. The earliest attestation of the name dates to the middle of the 4th century AD, following the Ḥimyarite conquest of Ḥaḍramawt. The Yazʿanides, being a tribe of considerable political influence, would go on to play an important role in South Arabia’s history during the 5th and 6th centuries. Furthermore, the Islamic tradition describes the South Arabian prince who sought to gain independence from Aksumite Ethiopia as Yazanite, calling him Sayf. b. *Ḍī Yazan*.

In the South Arabian epigraphy, the name *Ḍū Yazʿan* is consistently spelled with a glottal stop: *ḍ-yzʿn*. However, the Arabic tradition consistently transmits this name with two short vowels: *Ḍū Yazan*, as the following early (9th century) manuscript of the Ibn Hišām’s (d. 217/833) *sīrat al-nabī* indicates:

¹⁹³ I was unfortunately unable to access an image of this papyrus.

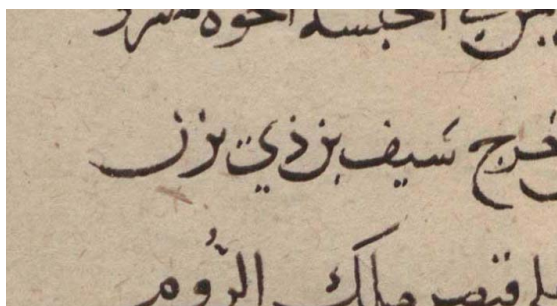


Figure 4: The name Sayf b. Dī Yazan in an early manuscript of Ibn Hišām’s *Sirat al-Nabī* (Vollers)

Toponymical evidence also shows the elision of the glottal stop, leading to forms such as *Būsān* < *B’s’n*, *al-Bār* < *B’rn*; *Yaklā* < *Ykl’*, to name a few examples. In some cases, the loss of the glottal stop resulted in a triphthong: examples include *Qāniya* < *Qn’tm*; *Lāgiyya* < *Lg’t*. The most likely reason for this is that, in the South Arabian language from which these toponyms were borrowed, the glottal stop was followed and preceded by two different short vowels, for example **Qāni’a* and *Lāgi’a*. The loss of the glottal stop led to an insertion of the semi-vowel *y*, resulting in the forms attested in Arabic.

To summarize, the epigraphic and manuscript evidence shows that the Late Sabaic glottal stop is no longer represented in the Arabic sources. This leads to the question whether the elision of the glottal stop occurred before or after these words were borrowed into Arabic. Although the highly stylistic nature of the South Arabian inscriptions rules out an easy answer, it seems more likely that this happened in Arabic. A typical feature of Hijazi Arabic was the elision of the *hamza* (glottal stop) in all positions, which is also reflected in the orthography of the Quranic consonantal text (Rabin 1951:130; Van Putten 2022:120–21).

However, as Rabin notes, the loss of the glottal stop in Hijazi Arabic usually leads to compensatory lengthening (e.g., *ḡūna* < *ḡu’na*, “leather bag”). At the same time, Islamic lexicographers transmit the pre-Islamic South Arabian name *Ḍū Yaz’an*¹⁹⁴ as *Yazan* (i.e., without the glottal stop), specifically commenting on the form of the name. For example, Ibn Manẓūr, quoting Ibn Ḡinnī, states the following (1890:4956):

“Ḍū Yazan: a king amongst the kings of Ḥimyar, the Yazanī spear (*rimmāḥ*) is attributed to him. Ibn Ḡinnī stated: Yazan does not inflect (*ḡayr maṣrūf*), its root being *yaz’anu*”.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Well-attested in this form in the pre-Islamic period, see also Robin (Robin and Schiettecatte 2013:209–14).

¹⁹⁵ Ibn Manẓūr *ḏū yazan malikun min mulūki ḥimyara tunabbu ilay-hi l-rimmāḥu l-yazaniyyatu* [...] *qāla ibn l-ḡinnīyyi ḏū yazan ḡayru maṣrūf wa-’aṣlu-hū yaz’anu bi-dalīli qawl-i-him rumḥun yaz’anīyyun wa-az’anīyyun wa-qālū ayḏan ’ayzanīyyun wa-waznu-hū ’ayfalī*

Therefore, while it seems likely that the glottal stop was elided following the transmission of these words from Sabaic to Arabic, some unsolved issues remain. Tentatively, this could be indicative of different linguistic strata or different moments of transfer.

3.1.5. Sporadic sound changes

3.1.5.1. **Datīnat* > *Daṭīna*

Lastly, there are some examples of sporadic sound changes whose underlying mechanics are not well understood.

In the Arabic sources, the name of the city of al-*Daṭīna*, located between Aden and al-Jadan, appears with a *ṭāʾ*, that is to say, a voiceless fricative (Yaqūt al-Rūmī 1977:440). Notably, Yāqūt also states that the city used to be called *Dafīnat* in the pre-Islamic period (*wa-yuqālu kānat tusammīyu fī l-ġāhiliyya dafīna*).

However, neither *Dṭnt* nor *Dfnt* are attested in the South Arabian epigraphy. The name *Dṭnt* first appears in the early Sabaic inscription RES 3945 and is subsequently mentioned in the South Sabaic inscription Abadān 1, before appearing again in the inscription Ag 3.¹⁹⁶ The toponym is also attested in the Qatabanic inscription RES 3688.

The lenition of *t* to *ṭ* is unusual for both Epigraphic South Arabian and Arabic. It is made all the more puzzling due to the fact that *Daṭīna* is located in an area that was originally under the control of Qataban and was later integrated into Ḥimyar. This is noteworthy, as the southern dialect of Sabaic that was used by the Ḥimyarites before their conquest of Saba⁷ occasionally points to the opposite merger, *ṭ* > *t* (Stein 2003:8).

In lieu of additional comparative material, it is perhaps most likely that the form *Daṭīna* arose as a result of hypercorrection.

3.1.5.2. **Sumhuyaṭaʿ* > *al-Hamaysaʿ*

Another example of a sporadic sound change is that of *sʿ* > *h*. A notable example is that of the personal name (al-)*Hamaysaʿ*.

In the Islamic tradition, several semi-historical characters bearing this name are mentioned, the most prominent being these is al-*Hamaysaʿ* b. Ḥimyar (al-Ḥuzāʿī 1997:36; Ibn al-Kalbī 1988:500, 533, Ibn Durayd 1987:1187). His name also appears in a poem attributed to one of his sons:

ʿabī l-mulku ʿillā ʿan yakūna waliyyu-hū wa-māliku-hū baʿda l-hamaysaʿi ʿaymanu

This name likely derives from the pre-Islamic South Arabian theophoric name *Sʿm(h)yṭʿ*, which is a compound of the noun *sʿm*, i.e., “name”, attested in the epi-

¹⁹⁶ Although at least the latter *Dṭnt* is likely to have been located in a different area because the inscription was written in northern Yemen.

graphic corpora both with and without the pronominal suffix *-h* and the verb *yṯ*^ᶜ, “to aid; protect” (Hayajneh 1998:271). The name itself does not occur very frequently in the South Arabian inscriptions: *S'mhyṯ*^ᶜ occurs once in an either Sabaic or Minaic inscription (Inabba[?] 1)¹⁹⁷ as a patronymic. *S'myṯ*^ᶜ is further attested in a Middle Sabaic inscription in the name of a lineage (Gr 34)¹⁹⁸ and once again as a personal name in a Late Sabaic inscription (Ry 520).¹⁹⁹

The sound change *ṯ* [θ] to *s'* [s (?)] is cross-linguistically common and is attested language-internally in Sabaic. Sima (2001:260) points out the spelling of the personal name *Sʹf-n-s'hw*, being derived from an earlier form **Sʹf-n-ṯhw*. This would lend some slight, but tangible, evidence of this sound change having occurred within Sabaic itself.

The presence of the fricative *h* is much more problematic, however. Like *ṯ* [θ] to *s*, the sound change *s* (either [s] or [ʃ])²⁰⁰ to *h* is cross-linguistically common and is also attested internally in Semitic. However, there is no internal evidence for a sound change *s' > h* in the recorded history of Sabaic.²⁰¹ Furthermore, other South Arabian theonyms containing the noun *s'm*, “name” were borrowed in Arabic without evidence of the sound change *s > h* (e.g., *samayda*^ᶜ, *samayfa*^ᶜ) (Ibn Durayd 1411:1187–88).²⁰²

It is possible that this name entered Arabic through a local South Arabian vernacular, possibly spoken towards the east of Southwest Arabia, essentially in what is now Hadramawt. A possible indication of this is the fact that one of the isoglosses of the Ḥaḍramitic inscriptions is the merger of *s³* and *ṯ*. Reflexes of the root *wṯ*^ᶜ can be found in the Ḥaḍramitic deific *ʔbys*^{3ᶜ} (< **ʔbyṯ*^ᶜ). Furthermore, although the sound change *s' to h* is not attested in Ḥaḍramitic, *h* is one of the outcomes of proto-Semitic *s'* in both Mehri and Soqotri (2.3.2).²⁰³ Although there is no direct evidence of the same sound change occurring in Ḥaḍramitic, there are

¹⁹⁷ Inabba[?] 1: *Wqhʔl Yfs² bn S'mhyṯ^ᶜ mlk ʔnb[?] bny Yḡl*, “Waqh-īl Yafuṣṣ, son of Sumhūyaṯ^ᶜ, king of Inabba[?], built Yaḡull!”

¹⁹⁸ Gr 34-2: *w-S²bmm w-R³ys¹ wa-S'myṯ^ᶜ br³w*, “Šabāmum and Raʔyas and Sumayṯ^ᶜ constructed...”

¹⁹⁹ Ry 520-2: *Hrm ʔws²k w-d-Kbs¹yn w-d-Wdnm w-d-Bnnr w-S'myṯ^ᶜ w-d-S¹dn ʔqwl ʔs²bn Tn^ᶜmm*, “Ḥaram ʔAwšak and dū-Kabsayyān and dū-Wadanim and dū-Banānir and Sumyāṯ^ᶜ and dū-Suddān, princes of the people Tun^ᶜimim...”

²⁰⁰ The exact realization of the sibilant is not immediately relevant either: the outcome of the Proto-Finnic postalveolar sibilant *š* [ʃ] is *h* [h] in Balto-Finnic but was retained as *š* in Finno-Permic, compare Finnish *vaahtera*, Mari *vaštar*, “maple”) (Bradley 2022: personal communication).

²⁰¹ There is a possibility that the preposition *hā-*, attested in some Arabic dialects in South Arabia, is eventually relate (see also below, 3.2.5).

²⁰² These names are derived from the South Arabian personal names *s'm(h)yṯ*^ᶜ (**sum(h)ū-yada*^ᶜ, “(his) name knows”) and *s'm(h)yf*^ᶜ (*sum(h)ū-yafa*^ᶜ, “(his) name protects”) respectively. The Arabic forms likely reflect a form of phonotactical adaptation, as Ibn Durayd lists all three names under the form *fa^ᶜaylal*.

²⁰³ See the discussion on Modern South Arabian phonology (2.3.2).

some indications of language contact between Pre-MSA and Ḥaḍramitic (Suchard 2017).²⁰⁴

There is some additional evidence suggesting that the shift *s'* to *h* may have occurred in some unwritten varieties of South Arabian. For example, the form *hāqah*, “plough tail” is attested in the dialect of Ḥuḡariyyah, spoken in the southern Yemeni Tihāma. Although this is far from Ḥaḍramawt, it may lend some credence to the notion that this sound change was in effect in some places (Behnstedt 2016:186)

To summarize, it is possible that this name was borrowed into Arabic at a relatively early stage. An important indication of this is that the root *hms*^ϕ is given a definition by Arabic lexicographers like Ibn Manẓūr. This, together with the fact that the name occurs both with and without the definite article suggests that it was firmly integrated into the Arabic lexicon.

Therefore, while not directly attested, it is not implausible that the South Arabian name Sumayfa^ϕ entered Arabic after having undergone certain sound changes particular to the extreme east of South Arabia, resulting in the following development:

<i>Sabaic</i>	>	<i>Spoken Ḥaḍramitic (?)</i>	>	<i>Eastern Yemeni Arabic</i>
*sum[h]uyiṭa ^ϕ		*humays ³ a ^ϕ		hamaysa ^ϕ

3.2. Morphology

3.2.1. The 1st and 2nd person suffix conjugation

The proto-Semitic suffix conjugation of the 1st and 2nd person reflected a heterogeneous system in which the former was marked with *-k(I)* and the latter person with *-t(I)*. This distribution was retained in the Akkadian static verb, but analogically levelled in other Semitic languages, with the 1st person suffix being replaced with *-t* or the second-person suffix with *-k* (Testen 2000:81).

In the South Arabian languages, this led to the following situation. The suffix conjugation of Epigraphic South Arabian, Modern South Arabian and Ethio-Semitic is markedly different from that of Arabic²⁰⁵ and Northwest Semitic. The 1st and 2nd person suffix conjugation of these languages is based on the suffix *-t[V]* (Lipinski 1997:379).

This uneven distribution led to some Semitic languages analogically replacing the first-person suffix with a *-t*, or, alternatively, the second person with a *-k* (see table 16):

²⁰⁴ See also the discussion about the directional particle *h-*, attested in both Ḥaḍramitic and several Modern South Arabian languages.

²⁰⁵ Excluding the Yemeni Arabic dialects discussed above.

Table 16: The suffix conjugation in various Semitic languages

	Proto-Semitic	Akkadian	Classical Arabic	Gəʿəz	Sabaic
2M	*-ta	<i>zikaṛā-ta</i>	<i>qatal-ta</i>	<i>ḵatalka</i>	<i>qtl-k</i>
2F	*-ti	<i>zikaṛā-ti</i>	<i>qatal-ti</i>	<i>ḵatalki</i>	<i>qtl-k</i>
1C	*-ku	<i>zikaṛā-k</i>	<i>qatal-tu</i>	<i>ḵatalki</i>	<i>qtl-k</i>

The South Arabian epigraphic evidence shows some degree of variation. In Standard Sabaic, both the 1st and 2nd person perfect is formed with a suffix *-k*. In the Amiritic or Haramic inscriptions, attested between 1st century BC and the 2nd century AD (1.1.2.), the 1st person pronominal suffix is attested with *-t*, as in Arabic.²⁰⁶

Medieval Arabic lexicographers considered the *k*-based 1st person suffix a typical Ḥimyaritic feature (Rabin 1951:51). A well-known example of this occurs in a sentence attributed to the mother of the South Arabian antiquarian Wahb b. Munabbih, who is supposed to have said the following. Apart from the pronominal suffix, there are several typically South Arabian features that will be discussed in more detail:

raʿay-ku *bi-n-ḥulm* *ka-walad-ku* *ibnan* *min* *ṭīb*²⁰⁷
 see-1.SG. PREP-DEF-dream CONJ-birth.1.SG. child.ACC from gold
 “I saw in a/the dream that I gave birth to a son of gold”

Further examples of the *k*-based suffix conjugation are found in al-Ḥamdānī’s *Kitāb al-Iklīl*, which mentions the verbs *bahalku*, “I said” and *iʿtafadku*, “I enclosed myself” (al-Ḥamdānī 1979:135).²⁰⁸

Several lines of poetry attributed to soldiers of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd I, who sung these lines during the siege of Mecca.

²⁰⁶ Huehnergard (Huehnergard 2017) notes that the Proto-Arabic system may have retained the heterogenous system on the basis of the South Arabian Arabic dialects, but in light of the suffix conjugation attested in the Amiritic inscriptions this seems unlikely.

²⁰⁷ This sentence contains certain typical South Arabian features which will be discussed in more detail later.

²⁰⁸ The 1940 edition by Nabīh Amīn Fāris mangles the text, but the modern manuscript (Leiden Or. produced in 1850/1931) gives a relatively accurate reading. The text should probably read as follows (but see also Belova’s reconstructions (1996:151–52) and Robin’s counter-argument (2011b:260)): *ʿanā Daybāḡa bint Nawf dī-Šaqar bni dī-Murāṭid. fa-bahalku li-ʿadamī yašʿam mandad ṭihn bi-mandad baḥrī fa-daw ʿašiya-hū lī fa-ʿtafadku bi-qabrī. fa-man samiʿa fa-l-yaḥzananna lī wa-ʿayyu mā unā labasat ḥalyan li-yakunanna mawtu-hā ḥinḡ mawṭī*, “I am Daybāḡa bt. Nawf dū Šaqar b. Dū Murāṭid. I told my servant to buy a measure of flour for a measure of pearls, but he did not find any, so I enclosed myself in my tomb. May whoever hear this grieve for me and may no woman be dressed in a robe like mine so that her death would be like my death.”

yā bna zubayri ṭāla mā ‘aṣay-kā *wa-ṭāla mā ‘annayta-nā ‘ilaykā*
*la-tuğzayyanna bi-llaḡī ‘atay-kā*²⁰⁹ *la-naḡribna bi-sayfinā qafaykā*
 “O, son of Zubayr, long have you been disloyal; long have you troubled us to come
 to you;
 You will be recompensed for what you have done; when we strike your neck with
 our sword.”

Rabin (1951:48) notes that these lines were transmitted by two independent sources. The first of these is al-Balāḡurī’s (d. 279/892) *Ansāb al-‘ašrāf* (volume 7:122), the latter al-Anṣārī’s *Nawādir* (357) (d. 215/830). Where al-Balāḡurī prefaces this line of poetry by saying it was recited by the “people of Syria” (*‘ahlu l-šām*), al-‘Anṣārī states that it came from a Ḥimyarī poet (*wa-qāla rāğiz min ḥimyar*).

The same suffix also appears in many dialects of Arabic spoken in South Arabia today. All of the dialects exhibiting this feature are spoken in the highlands of northern and southwest Yemen. Dialects with suffix *-t[V]*, as found elsewhere in Arabic, are generally restricted to three areas: the coastal plain (the Tihama), the area around Zafār in Central Yemen, and the mountain villages of the southern Asir and eastern Jazan provinces in Saudi-Arabia (Behnstedt 2016:192):

Table 17: 1st and 2nd person suffix conjugation in Yemeni Arabic

	‘Igz	as-Sayyānī	al-Haḡiyeh	Ğabal Fayfā’	az-Zāhir
2M	<i>katabka</i>	<i>katabk</i>	<i>katabk</i>	<i>katabta</i>	<i>katabta</i>
2F	<i>katabš</i>	<i>katabki</i>	<i>katabč</i>	<i>katabti</i>	<i>katabtin</i>
1S	<i>katabku</i>	<i>katabku</i>	<i>katabk</i>	<i>katabt</i>	<i>kababtu</i>

3.2.2. The internal plural *‘aCCūC*

The internal (or broken) plural is a common feature attested in several West Semitic languages, including Arabic (2.5.3.6), Gə‘əz (2.4.3.4), Late Sabaic (2.4.4.4), and Modern South Arabian (2.4.3.4).²¹⁰ Although the lack of vocalization hinders a secure reconstruction of the broken plural’s pattern in Sabaic, there is some evidence for the plural form *‘aCCūC* (Hayajneh 2011:137; Behnstedt 2016:85, Lipinski 1997:248–49). This pattern is notably absent in Classical Arabic:

Table 18: The broken plural forms **‘aCCūC* and **‘aCCāC*

Proto-CS [?]	Sabaic	Gə‘əz	Arabic
<i>*‘aCCūC</i>	<i>ʔfl</i>	<i>ʔafʔul</i> (e.g., <i>ʔahgur</i>)	–
<i>*‘aCCāC</i>	<i>ʔfl</i>	<i>ʔafʔal</i> (e.g., <i>ʔahzāb</i>)	<i>ʔafʔāl</i>

²⁰⁹ The first half of the second line is not quoted by Abū Zayd.

²¹⁰ See also the discussion of the broken plural in their respective languages, above (pages x, y, z).

There is ample lexical and onomastic evidence from the medieval tradition and contemporary Yemeni Arabic dialects to suggest that both types of broken plural existed in Sabaic. In his *Şifat ġazīrat al-ʿarab*, the 10th century scholar al-Hamdānī refers to several South Arabian tribal groups whose name appears to follow the pattern *ʿafūl*.

Sabaic	<i>Şifat</i>
<i>ʿḥṭbn</i>	<i>al-ʿAḥṭūb</i>
<i>ʿbqrn</i>	<i>al-ʿAbqūr</i>
<i>ʿḡḡd</i>	<i>al-ʿAḡḡd</i>
<i>ʿgddn</i>	<i>al-ʿAḡḡdū</i>
<i>ʿḥrm</i>	<i>al-ʿAḥrūm</i>
<i>ʿyfr²¹¹</i>	<i>al-ʿAyfū^ḡ</i>

Adding to this, Hayajneh (2011:136) also notes the forms al-ʿAbūs, al-Aḡrūm, al-ʿAdūn, al-ʿArūš and al-ʿAfrū^ḡ.

Furthermore, in one of his citations of a pre-Islamic South Arabian inscription, al-Hamdānī notes what seems to be an *ʿaCCūC*-type broken plural. The various readings of al-Hamdānī’s text are given in the table below:

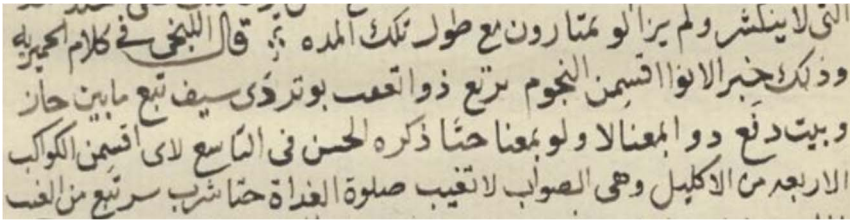
Table 19: Various readings of al-Hamdānī’s ‘Himyaritic’

Manuscript	Interpretation
Belova (1996)	<i>ʿqsmn ʿnḡwm ʿrb^ḡ ḡw tḡyb lw yrwy sd bt^ḡ</i>
Robin (2011b)	<i>ʿqsmn ʿ(n)-nḡwm ʿ(r)-rb^ḡ ḡw tḡyb tw yrwy sd bt^ḡ</i>
al-Akwa ^ḡ (1948)	<i>ʿqsmn ʿnḡwm ʿbrb^ḡ ḡw tḡyb lw yrwy sd bt^ḡ</i>
al-Ḥaṭīb (1987)	<i>ʿqsmn ʿnḡwm ʿbrb^ḡ ḡw tḡyb lw yry sd bt^ḡ</i>
Manuscript Or. 6357	<i>ʿqsmn ʿlnḡwm yrt^ḡ ḡw [ʿl]t^ḡy b wtr ḡy syf tb^ḡ</i>

Al-Hamdānī himself gives the corresponding Classical Arabic translation as follows (leaving the initial verb *ʿqsmn* untranslated): *ʿuqsiman* [ʿ] *al-kawākibu al-ʿarbaʿatu wa-hiya ḡ-ḡawābu lā tuḡību ḡalāta l-ḡadāti ḡattā yuḡrab sadda bata^ḡ212 mā baḡna ḡāz wa-bayt daḡa^ḡ* “the four stars – the constellation al-ḡawāb – will not disappear before the morning prayers until the dam of Bata^ḡ has been watered”.

²¹¹ Although this could theoretically also be read as an elative (**ʿayfaʿu(?)*), it is worth pointing out that this occurs twice as tribal name in the inscriptions (Ir 37:5; Ja 658+659:3)

²¹² *Tubba^ḡ* in the Leiden manuscript.



al-Hamdānī's citation from Iklīl 10 (Leiden Or.6357, page 7).

As table 19 shows, Robin (2011b:260) suggests reading both *ʔngwm* and *ʔrbʕ* with an unwritten assimilating definite article, i.e., *an-nuḡūm ar-rabiʕa*. While this reading is possible, one can also read *am-ʔanḡūm am-ʔarbaʕ*, which is more in line with al-Akwaʕ's edition.²¹³ This would also explain the apparent lack of the definite article, which is otherwise present in other citations of Ḥimyaritic.

There is some evidence of the *ʔaCCūC*-type broken plural having spread into Classical Arabic. The 4th/10th century tradition al-Ṭabarānī (d. 971) recounts a tradition (al-Ṭabarānī 1983:169), attributed to the companion ʔUmāma al-Bāhilī (d. 700), in which the Prophet is supposed to have asked for supplication to be granted to several South Arabian tribes. One of these is mentioned as the *ʔamlūk*, with the Prophet specifying that “among the best of people are the *ʔamlūk*, the *ʔamlūk* of Ḥimyar” (*ʔinna min ḥiyāri n-nāsi l-ʔamlūku ʔamlūku ḥimyar*).^{214, 215}

Although the word *ʔamlūk* is interpreted as referring to a specific tribe (Ibn Ḥazm 1962:478; Kaḥḥāla 1997:32), it is perhaps more likely that the prophetic tradition refers to a South Arabian plural of a Sabaic form **malik*. The word *ʔmlk* is frequently attested in the pre-Islamic epigraphy as the plural of the word *mlk*, “king” but not as a tribal name. The prophetic tradition possibly intended to state that “the kings (*ʔamlūk*) of Ḥimyar” and used a South Arabian term that was interpreted to refer to a tribe.²¹⁶

In his discussion of the term *al-ʔuḥdūd*, Hayajneh mentions a similar prophetic tradition found in al-ʕIryānī's *al-muʕḡam al-yamanī* (Hayajneh 2011:136–37).

²¹³ Neither interpretation would explain why *ʔarbaʕ* stands in the masculine rather than the expected feminine.

²¹⁴ This tradition is recounted with some slight variations by later traditionalists. These include Nūr al-Dīn al-Hayṭamī (d. 1404), whose account is essentially the same as al-Ṭabarānī's, but a more divergent tradition is given by Ibn Ḥaḡar al-Hayṭamī (d. 1565), who recounts that the Prophet prayed for “the *ʔamlūk* of Radmān” (*ṣalā rasūlu lillāhi (ṣ) ʕalā s-sakūna wa-s-sakkāka wa-ʕalā ḥawlāna l-ʕāliyyati wa-ʕalā l-ʔamlūki ʔamlūki radmān*).

²¹⁵ It is no coincidence that prophetic traditions extolling the virtues of South Arabia and South Arabians were recounted by companions who came to reside in Ḥims. During the middle Umayyad caliphate, Ḥims became a powerhouse of predominantly South Arabian tribal factions who were in anticipation of gaining control over the caliphate (Madelung 1986).

²¹⁶ It is also worth pointing out that as a tribal name, *al-ʔamlūk* is only rarely mentioned: the only reference I located in a classical work of genealogy occurs in the *Ġamharat ʔansāb al-ʕarab* by Ibn Ḥazm, who lived in Cordoba in the 4th/11th century. The noun is further retained in a Yemeni toponym, i.e., *ʕizlat al-ʔamlūk*, located c. 60 kilometers east of Ibb.

According to this tradition, the Prophet is supposed to have said *fa-ʔinnī istaʕ-maltuka ʕalā qawmika ʕarabi-him wa-ʔaḥmūrī-him wa-mawāli-him*, “I employed you over your people, their ʕarab and their ʔaḥmūr and their associates”. This would be an example of a similar pre-Islamic plural ʔaḥmūr, ‘Ḥimyarites’, also attested in six pre-Islamic inscriptions, having survived into the Islamic period.

Lastly, several contemporary Yemeni Arabic attest to the usage of the ʔaCCūC plural. Its distribution is not limited to a specific area, rather, it is found in several dialects around Ṣanʕāʔ, in the highlands between Jabal Raymah, further north around Jabal Ḥufaš and as far south as Taʕizz (Behnstedt 2016:84–85). The relatively wide distribution of the ʔaʕmūm plural could suggest, in turn, that it was relatively widespread in Sabaic, as Brockelmann already pointed out (Brockelmann 2018:432)

3.2.3. The nasal definite article *an-/am-*

As was previously discussed, the definite article developed differently in the languages of South Arabia. Most scholars are of the opinion that the definite article goes back to an original Proto-Semitic demonstrative **hān-* or **han-* (Lipinski 1997:269). Due to the lack of the definite article in East Semitic and Gəʕəz, it is normally assumed that this was a Central Semitic development (Rubin 2014:65).²¹⁷

Pat-El (2009:40) suggests that the definite article probably originated in a grammaticalized form of the proto-Semitic deictic **hā-*, which developed into two allomorphic forms: *han-* and *hal-*. According to Pat-El, this deictic was originally used to disambiguate attributive phrases from predicate phrases. Because this process did not occur with nouns in construct state, this led to a reanalysis of the adnominal marker as a definite marker (Pat-El 2009:43). In (Old) Aramaic and Epigraphic South Arabian, the sequence <N han-DEM> was reanalyzed as <N-han DEM>.

One of the most ubiquitous features of the Arabic spoken in some regions of South Arabia is the pre-nominal definite article *am-/an-*. Early Islamic authors considered this phenomenon to be typically South Arabian. For example, the sentence attributed to Wahb b. al-Munabbih’s mother contains the word *an-ḥulm*, “the dream”. Al-Ḥamdānī associates the *am-* article with four different tribes: the ʔAšʕār, the ʕAkk, the Ḥakam and the ʕUḍar (al-Ḥamdānī 1974:278).

The association between the definite article *-am* and South Arabia also found its way to some Prophetic traditions. There is a famous *ḥadīṡ* in which the Prophet is supposed to have said “It is not necessary to fast when travelling”, which is

²¹⁷ The origin of the definite article in the Modern South Arabian language is uncertain. Voigt (1998:248–50) assumes predecessor of the Modern South Arabian article *ha-/ḥa-/ʔaC-* is an archaism. Kogan (2015:478) is much more skeptical of this notion and notes that while an article can plausibly be reconstructed to proto-MSA, its relation to the Central Semitic determiner *han/hān* remains unclear.

given as (al-Šāfi‘ī and al-Nāṣirī 2005:934)²¹⁸ The 11th century scholar al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī states in his *al-Kifāya fī-l-riwāya* that this phenomenon was common amongst the ‘Aš‘ār and gives several more examples:²¹⁹

“I²²⁰ heard the Prophet say: *laysa min am-birr am-šiyām fī-m-safar*. I said: ‘that is to say: ‘there is no necessity to fast when travelling (*laysa min al-birr l-šiyām fī l-safar*). This is Aš‘arite language (*luġat al-‘ašarīyyīn*) who say a *mīm* instead of a *lām*, the say: *ra‘aynā ‘am-riġāl* when they mean *al-riġāl* and *marrarnā bi-m-qawm*, which is to say *bi-l-qawm*. This speech is used in Yemen to this day” (*wa-hiya luġa mustafīda ‘ilā l-yawmi bi-l-yaman*).

As Rabin (Rabin 1951:35) already pointed out, there is no reason to suggest a connection between the Epigraphic South Arabian suffixed definite article *-[V]n* and the Yemeni Arabic definite article *-am/-an*. In fact, as al-Jallad has recently shown, the epigraphic indicates that an-article was in use in the Central Arabian Najd, probably already before the 4th century AD (Al-Jallad 2021:). If true, this would clearly preclude a South Arabian origin.²²¹

There is no concrete evidence of the suffixed definite article *-(h)n* surviving into the Islamic period. It has been suggested that a “Ḥimyaritic” saying, quoted in the second volume of al-Ḥamdānī’s *al-Iklīl* contains this suffixed definite article, but this seems unlikely. This line is cited as follows: *daw hal qaylan dū ġarra ġaylan*, which al-Ḥamdānī translates as “he is no king who is not able to direct the flood waters” (*laysa bi-malikin man lā yaqdir ‘alā fatqi l-‘uyūn*). Although the suffixed *-an* on the nouns *qayl* and *ġayl* can be interpreted as reflecting the South Arabian definite article, it is more likely that this reflects an Arabic hypercorrection, i.e., reading these nouns as if they were Arabic indefinites.

²¹⁸ The earliest reference I found occurs in al-Šāfi‘ī’s (d. 204/820) *Musnad*. The tradition is transmitted by al-Zubayr al-Ḥumaydī (d. 219/834-5) and al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933). Although the editor of al-Šāfi‘ī’s *Musnad* “corrects” the *am*-article to *al-*, the *am*-article is maintained in the edition here used (al-Zubayr 1996:113).

²¹⁹ *‘an ummi l-durdā’a ‘an ka‘bin ibnu ‘āšimīni l-‘aš‘arī qala sami‘tu rasūla llāhi š yaqūlu laysa min am-birr am-šiyām fī am-safar qultu ‘arāda laysa mina l-birri l-šiyāmu fī l-safari wa-hādā luġatu l-‘aš‘arīyyīna yaqūlūna l-lāma mīman fā-yaqūlūna ra‘aynā ‘ulā’ika am-riġāla yuridūna r-riġāl.*

²²⁰ The *isnād* goes back to Ka‘b b. ‘Āšim Abū Mālik al-‘Aš‘arī, a companion of the Prophet who died between 20/641 and 50/672 (Ibn Sa‘d 2001:418).

²²¹ Rabin further suggests that archaic assimilating articles in Ḍafār next to the regular *al*-based article may reflect an older article with *am/-an-*, although progressive assimilation of the definite article is attested in other Arabic dialects as well (Rabin 1951:35; Testen 2011:204) Consider for example the variation in Egyptian Arabic between *il-gamal* and *ig-gamal* (Abdel-Masih et al. 2009:83).

3.2.4. Nominalizer *mVqtāl*

A common feature of the various languages of South Arabia is the usage of the prefix *mV-* to form nouns. Historically, the most well-established form of this prefix is that of the locative **maqtal*, which is attested as far back as Akkadian *maškanum*, ‘place’ and has etymological parallels in West Semitic, e.g., Arabic *maskan*, ‘place’ (Weninger 2011b:164).

The system of this different *mV*-type nominalizers is most strictly formalized in Classical Arabic, summarized as follows:

- *ma-*: locatives and passive participles of the G-stem (stem I), e.g., *maktaba(tun)*, ‘library’ (*kataba*, ‘to write’); *maqtūl*, ‘killed’ (< *qatala*, ‘to kill’)
- *mu-*: active and passive participles of non-G-stems, e.g., *muqātil*, ‘warrior’; *mubārak*, ‘blessed’ (< *bāraka*, ‘to bless’).
- *mi-*: instrument nouns, e.g., *miftāh*, ‘key’ (< *fataha*, ‘to open’).

Outside Arabic, the system is less self-evident:

The same system appears to be productive in Sabaic, but the orthographic limitations makes it impossible to know which vowel following the affix *m-*, for example *m^hrm*, ‘one who removes’ < *h^hhr*, ‘to remove’ or *ms³wrm*, ‘one who detaches’ < **hs³wr*, ‘to detach’ (Stein 2003:201).

Most puzzling is the system in Gəʿəz, where the form *ma-* is often found instead of *mə*, the expected outcome of etymological **mu-* or **mi-* (Weninger 2011b:164). Hence the forms *maṭməq*, ‘baptizer’ (< *tamaqa*, ‘to baptize’) and *marḥō*, ‘key’ (< *ʾarḥawa*, ‘to open’), which exist next to forms of the type *maqtāl* (e.g., *mənbār*, ‘seat, throne, abode’; *məskāb*, ‘couch; bed’ (Leslau 1941, 1987:468, 593; Tropper and Hasselbach 2021:95–96). Interestingly, similar instrumental nouns with an initial syllable *ma-* are attested in several Yemeni Arabic dialects, for example *mahrab*, ‘plough tail’ (Zafār); *maqrin*, ‘yoke’ (Aden), *maḥašš*, ‘sickle’ (Tihāma), *mal^ʿab*, id. (Ḥaḍramawt).

Several *mV*-type nouns found in the Classical Arabic lexica that do not exhibit the expected vocalic pattern further complicates the historical reconstruction of this nominalizer. However, these terms are usually considered to have been borrowed from Gəʿəz or a South Arabian language. The most well-known examples are *minbar*, ‘pulpit’, *miškāh*, ‘(lamp) niche’ and *muṣḥaf*, ‘volume; book’ (Jeffery 2007:266; Khoury 1998:5–6; Nöldeke 1910:49–50). Furthermore, according to al-Selwi, the Arabic tradition preserves the following South Arabian lexemes that similarly begin with a prefixed *mi-*:

- *mihrāb* (*maḥārīb*), ‘palace, castle; upper floor’
- *miḥlāf* (*maḥālīf*), ‘province’
- *mi^ʿḡār* (*ma^ʿāḡir*), ‘decorated scarf’
- *mi^ʿdār* (*ma^ʿādīr*), ‘veil; curtain’²²²

²²² The Islamic tradition transmits the word *i*, ‘excuses’ (e.g., Qurʾān 75:15) as the plural of either *ma^ʿdīra*, or less commonly *mi^ʿdār*. The 7th/14th century theologian al-Samīn al-Ḥalabī mentions *mi^ʿdār* as ‘curtain in the language of Yemen’ (*al-sutūr bi-luḡati l-yaman*) (al-Ḥalabī 2016:572)

- *miʿqāb*, “storage room”
- *miqrāna*, “measuring tape”
- *miqwal* (*maqāwīl*), “a South Arabian ruler”

To these forms one can also add the Yemeni Arabic form *miḥbir/maṭābir* “a dam that has been damaged by excessive rain” (Al-Selwi 1987). Although some of these nouns can be interpreted as “instrument nouns”, the terms *miḥrāb*, *miḥlāf*, *miʿqāb* and *miqwal* hardly fall into that semantic category.

This, in turn, raises the question as to why these forms are recorded with the vowel *i* in the initial syllable. It is possible that, in their attempt to represent the *schwa* (ə), the Arabic lexicographers considered the vowel *i* the closest available equivalent. A similar kind of fluctuation can be seen in the *muṣḥaf* ~ *miṣḥaf*, which may reflect competing notions of representing *schwa*, i.e., **māṣḥaf*. This notion finds some additional support in al-Malik al-Afdal’s *Arabic-Ethiopic* glossary, wherein initial *mə-* is normally represented with *mi-*, e.g., *miṅqVl* (< **māṅqal*) “basket”; *miṭʿad* (< *māṭʿad*), “a type of pan” (Bulakh and Kogan 2014:161).

Assuming that these terms entered Arabic through South Arabia, it would also offer an alternative explanation as to why the Gəʿəz forms with *ma-* were transmitted in the Arabic tradition with *mu-* or *mi-*. A change of etymological **mu-* and **mi-* to *ma-* would not necessarily preclude a Gəʿəz origin for these words, just that they entered Arabic through a South Arabian intermediary, wherein the initial vowel was reduced to ə.

Based on this material, it is plausible that the initial vowel in mV-type nouns in Late Sabaic was reduced. In this case, such nouns could be tentatively vocalized on the pattern *məqtal/məqtāl*.

3.2.5. The prepositions *s³n-* and *s¹wn-*

Two semantically similar prepositions are attested in various stages of Sabaic: *s³n-*, “to, up to; next to; by” *s¹wn-*, “to; towards”. Despite their similarities, these two prepositions are etymologically unrelated (Stein 2003:213).

The former almost certainly reflects a grammaticalization of the noun *s³n*, “boundary”, which is also attested as a noun in Minaic and Qatabanic (Avanzini 2017).²²³ The grammaticalization of a lexeme “boundary” into a locative preposition is attested in several other languages, including Swahili and Tamil (Kuteva, Heine, and Hong 2018:259). Due to the coalescence of the sibilants *s¹* and *s³* in the Late Sabaic period, this preposition occasionally came to be spelled as *s¹n-* (Stein 2003:213).

The preposition *s¹wn-*, “to; towards”, on the other hand, possibly represents a particular development of a proto-Semitic terminative **(V)š* (Lipinski 1997:260;

²²³ A similar process of the word “border” grammaticalizing is Arabic *ḥattā* (< ḥadd, “border”) and the feminine demonstrative *tay* (Al-Jallad 2017c). Compare also Swahili *mpaka*, until < *m-paka*, “border” (Kuteva, Heine, and Hong 2018:259)

Weninger 2011b:165). This terminative is attested in Akkadian (e.g., *Idiglat-eš*, “into the Tigris”) and Northwest Semitic (e.g., Ugaritic *šmm-h*, “to the skies” and Hebrew *ʿarṣā* “into the earth”) (Bordreuil and Pardee 2009:59; Merwe and Naudé 2017:228).

The appearance of the enclitic *-n* should then be seen as a Sabaic innovation, which had a similar function the *-n* found in prepositions such as *b-n*, “from”; *ḥg-n*, “on the authority of”.²²⁴ The attestation of the form *sʼ-mlkn* in two Late Sabaic inscriptions may indicate a further development of the same preposition; if this is the case, the loss of the nasal could be attributed to its assimilation in Late Sabaic (i.e., **sʼn-mlkn* (**sīn-malikān*) > *sʼ-mlkn* (**sīm-malikān*) (see also 3.1.2) (Stein 2003:214).

Modern dialectological research indicates that these prepositions survived in several contemporary dialects. The preposition *sī-*, “to” is attested in two distinct Yemeni Arabic varieties, one spoken in al-al-Nāzīr, near Ṣaʿda, and the other in Central Yemen (Ṣirwāḥ, near Marib) (Behnstedt 1992:600).²²⁵ Another preposition, *sanā*, “up to, in the direction of” is attested in the Tihāma (specifically in al-Hudayda and Zabīd) (Behnstedt 1992:590).

On phonological and semantic grounds, the northern and central Yemeni form *sī* probably represents a direct continuation of Late Sabaic *sʼ-*, particularly if this form is reconstructed with a long vowel. The form *sanā*, predominantly attested in the Tihāma might rather descend from the form *sʳn-*.

3.2.6. The preposition *hV-*

A particular shared isogloss between Ḥaḍramitic and the Modern South Arabian languages is the preposition *h-*.

In Ḥaḍramitic, this preposition is attested in a dative-benefactive sense:

ʿUqayba 3 (translation author):

<i>Rʳbʳsʳt</i>	<i>bn</i>	<i>ʳmʳnsʳf</i>	[<i>l</i>]	<i>h-mrʳ-sʳ</i> .	<i>Ydʳ[ʳb]</i>	<i>Ġyln</i>	<i>bn</i>	[<i>Sʳm</i>]	<i>ḥyʳf</i>
<i>Rʳbʳsʳt</i>	son.CST	<i>ʳmʳnsʳ</i>	made	PREP-lord.his	<i>Ydʳ[ʳb]</i>	<i>Ġyln</i>	son.CST	<i>Sʳmḥyʳf</i>	
“Raʳbiʳsʳat son of ʳAmmīʳanas made for his lord Yadaʳaʳab Ġaylān son of Sumḥūyafaʳ									

²²⁴ On the other hand, the function of the enclitic *-n* is normally understood as an ablative (Prioletta 2014:103).

²²⁵ It is worth noting that in the dialect of al-Nāzīr, the preposition *min* is realized as *mē*, with full assimilation of the nasal. For example: *safritna meṣ-Ṣaʿdah sī Rāzīḥ*, “our trip from al-Saʿda to Rāzīḥ” (Behnstedt 1987:167; 1992:600).



Inscription ‘Uqayba 3 (CSAI)

In Modern South Arabian the preposition *h-* (and its various allophones, see table 20) are used to mark the direct object of the verb “to speak” or to indicate benefaction. It is attested across Modern South Arabian (Johnstone 1977:49; Kogan and Bulakh 2019:302–3; Nakano and Ratcliffe 2013:288; Rubin 2014:243, 2018:266):

Table 20: Locative *h*-based prepositions in Modern South Arabian

Mehri	Shehret	Harsusi	Hobyot	Socotri
<i>ha-</i>	<i>h-</i> ; <i>her-</i>	<i>h(e)-</i>	<i>ha-</i>	[?] <i>e-</i> ; <i>hV</i> - ²²⁶

Furthermore, the preposition *hā* is attested in at least two varieties of Arabic spoken in Yemen today, but in varying meanings. In the dialect of Jabal Rāziḥ (also Rāziḥi or Rāziḥīt), the particle *hā* is used before the active participle (Watson et al. 2006).

However, in two dialects spoken south of Ta‘izz, the particle *hā* has a purely locative sense, e.g., *ha m-gibāl*, “in the mountains”. Furthermore, in the dialect of Umm Laylā, which lies in the same environment as Ġabal Rāziḥ, *ha-* is also used in a locative sense, but only in domestic or mercantile situations, e.g., *ha m-bēt*, “at home”; *ha m-dukkān*, “in the store” (but: *bayn im-ḥāhī sukkarin*, “there is sugar in the tree”) (Procházka 1993:98, 225).

Judging by its presence in the Modern South Arabian languages in basically the same dative meaning, the preposition *h-* likely goes back to Proto-Modern-South Arabian. Its presence in the Ḥaḍramitic inscriptions can be attributed to linguistic contact between Ḥaḍramitic and an early form of Modern South Arabian. The sound change *s > h* both cross-linguistically common (see also above, 3.1.5.2) and the outcome of Proto-Semitic *s'* is regularly *h* in Mehri and Soqotri.²²⁷ It is unclear, however, whether this preposition can be reconstructed beyond Proto-MSA.

Although it is possible that the prepositions *s^lwn-/s³n-* and the (proto-)Modern South Arabian *hV-* are related, it is not necessarily a given. Considering the

²²⁶ Note that the etymological *h-* is restored when the preposition [?]*e-* occurs when attached to the personal pronoun suffixes, e.g., [?]*ε*, “you (M.SG)” but *hək*, “for you” (Naumkin and Kogan 2015a:46,461)

²²⁷ The origin of the rhotic element in Shehret *her-* is unclear.

attestation of the Minaic lexeme s^3n , “boundary; limit”, the development of $*s^3 > *s^1 > h$ requires at least one ad-hoc sound change. This is particularly problematic as the Sabaic form s^3n - is attested throughout its history, up until the Late Sabaic period.²²⁸ It is possible that this particle is eventually related to the Modern South Arabian preposition hV -.²²⁹ If this is the case, this would suggest possible pre-historic contact between proto-Sabaic and proto-MSA.

3.2.7. Internal passive

The internal passive is a morphological phenomenon attested in several Semitic languages. As the name implies, the internal passive shows passive voice by modifying the verb’s internal vocalic pattern (apophony). It is attested particularly in the Central Semitic languages, compare the following examples of the G-stem (Fischer 1998:110, 120; Gzella 2015:34; Merwe and Naudé 2017:73, 81–82):

Table 21: The internal passive of the G-stem in various Central Semitic languages

	Classical Arabic	Hebrew	Early Aramaic
Preterit active	<i>qatala</i>	<i>qātal</i>	<i>katab</i>
Preterit passive	<i>qutila</i>	<i>quṭal</i>	<i>katīb</i>
Imperfect active	<i>yaqtulu</i>	<i>yiqṭal</i>	<i>yaktob</i>
Imperfect passive	<i>yuktabu</i>	<i>yiqūṭal</i>	<i>yoktab</i>

Despite the orthographic limitations of the South Arabian script, it is also assumed that an internal passive existed in Sabaic (see 2.2.4.5.).

Due to its attestations in many Central Semitic languages, the internal passive is considered to have been a Central Semitic innovation (Huehnergard 2019:65; Kogan 2015:54). Complicating its identification as a Central Semitic isogloss is the attestation of the internal passive in Modern South Arabian (2.3.3.5), but its absence in the Ethio-Semitic languages (2.4.3.5.). Consequently, Huehnergard allows for the possibility that Proto-Ethio-Semitic either lost the internal passive as a morphological category, or that it was innovated after it had split off from West Semitic.

Alternatively, it has been suggested that the internal passive may have developed in Modern South Arabian as a result of linguistic contact. Dufour notes that the passive of the G-stem in the Modern South Arabian languages corresponds to the historical form of the forms attested in Classical Arabic (Dufour 2016:340):

²²⁸ The first dated attestation of the particle s^3n occurs in the inscription Ma’ sal 3 (*w-rkbn s^3n wṣh-hmw ḥl-hmw*, “and they).

²²⁹ Despite their semantic proximity, the sound change $t > s^1$ is not attested in Late Sabaic. The spelling of etymological t with s^3 is sporadically attested in the Amiritic inscriptions (e.g., Haram 35:7 *l-ys^3wbn-h* instead of *l-yṭwbnh*) while the spelling of etymological t with s^1 is more common in the Late Sabaic inscriptions from Yanbuq. As Sima (2001:260-61) points out, this can probably be attributed to Ḥaḍramitic influence, as these inscriptions occur in what used to be Ḥaḍramitic territory.

Table 22: The internal passive in Classical Arabic and Modern South Arabian

	<i>masculine</i>	<i>feminine</i>
Classical Arabic	<i>qutila</i>	<i>qutilat</i>
Omani Mehri	<i>rkēz</i>	<i>rkəzēt</i>
Shehret	<i>kisif</i>	<i>kisifot</i>
Soqotri	<i>figεg</i>	<i>figīgoh</i>

The introduction of the internal passive into Proto-Modern South Arabian as a result of linguistic contact is plausible. The internal passive was lost in most Arabic dialects; the passive voice came to be expressed either through paraphrastic constructions or by the use of semantically passive derived stem forms (Holes 2018: 23–24) (Fischer 1995:81–82). Notably, internal passive constructions are predominantly retained in Arabic dialects spoken in South Arabia (Davey 2016:151–53).

Notably, the internal passive is attested in several dialects of Arabic spoken in Northern Yemen today. Behnstedt (1987:191) notes its presence in the dialect of Banī Munabbih, where the following forms are distinguished:

Table 23: Active and passive G-stem verbs in northern Yemeni Arabic

active		passive		translation
<i>gatal</i>	<i>yagtul</i>	<i>gitil</i>	<i>yigtal</i>	“to kill”
<i>sarag</i>	<i>yasrug</i>	<i>sirig</i>	<i>yisrag</i>	“to steal”
<i>ḥabaṭ</i>	<i>yahbuṭ</i>	<i>ḥibiṭ</i>	<i>yihbaṭ</i>	“to thresh”
–	–	<i>ḡi‘il</i>	<i>yig‘al</i>	“to become”
<i>gaššas</i>	<i>yigaššis</i>	<i>giššis</i>	<i>yigaššas</i>	“to shear”

The retention of the internal passive throughout South Arabia (while noting its absence in the Ethio-Semitic languages) can be seen as an areal phenomenon. While it is possible that the internal passive was (re-)introduced into Modern South Arabian through contact with Old Arabic, the fact that it continues to be productive throughout South Arabia indicates its presence across linguistic boundaries is likely to be an areal feature.

3.3. Syntax

3.3.1. Negation *dʔ*; *dw*

A few Late Sabaic texts indicate the usage of a negative particle *dʔ*. The origin and usage of this particle is discussed in Sjörs’ monograph on negation in Semitic languages (2019). In Late Sabaic, this negative particle occurs four times: three times in monumental inscriptions (CIH 540, CIH 541 and Ry 507) and at least once in a letter (X. BSB 145) (Al-Selwi 1987:89–90; Rabin 1951).

In the inscriptions, this particle is used primarily to negate verbs in the suffix conjugations, regardless of syntactic position (Sjörs 2018:291–93). In the singular attestation in the miniscule inscription X.BSB 145, there might be evidence of *d*[?] negating a verb in the prefix conjugation (Sjörs 2018:291). As Müller (1989:51) notes, this negation probably originated in Radmān (Southwest South Arabia), where it occurs in compounded *b-k-mw*, in the sense of “without”²³⁰.

Ry 507:7 (CSAI)

w-k-d[?] *whbt* *rhnn*
 CONJ-ADV-NEG surrender.CST hostages.DEF.
 “and when there was no surrender of the hostages (...)”.

CIH 540:66 (CSAI)

b-ʔs[?]bm *d-d*[?] *hr* *ʔly-hmw*
 prep-tribes.INDEF REL-NEG acquit. PREP-3.M.PL
 “with the tribes that had not acquitted themselves”.

X.BSB 145:3 (Stein 2016)

w-hmw *f-ḥwd-hw* *dnrtn*²³¹ *w-d*[?] *yd[?]* *k-ʔlt*
 CONJ-3.M.PL CONJ-give-3.SG. dinar.DEF and-NEG know CONJ-REL.
 “And they gave him the dinar, but did he did not know that this (...)”

The same negator is attested in South Arabia into the early Islamic period. Al-Hamdānī cites various lines of “Himyaritic” which contain the negation *dw*:

Iklīl 10:36

daw taḡīb (?) *law* *yurwā* *sadd* *bata[?]*²³²
 NEG 2.F.SG.change if 3.M.SG.water.PASS dam.CST *Bata[?]*
 “It will not change unless the dam of Bata[?] is watered”.

Iklīl 8:135

fa-daw *ʔaṣiya-hū* *lī* *fa-ʔtafad-ku* *bi-qabr[?]*²³³
 CONJ-NEG find-3.M.SG for.me CONJ-entomb-PAST.1.SG PREP-tomb.1.SG
 “He did not find it for me, so I entombed myself”.

The same negator is still found in several contemporary Arabic dialects spoken in the southern Yemeni Tihama, specifically the area between Mokha, Taiz, and al-Hujariyyah (Behnstedt and Woidich 2021:469). This negator is attested in various allomorphic forms, i.e., *da*[?], *daw*[?] and *duwayy*.

²³⁰ Mafray al-Mi[?]sāl 2: (12) *f-k-ʔl ywm ʔtw ḥbym dkb-mw mhrgtm*, “never did he return disappointed, without spoils”.

²³¹ For a discussion on the form and origin of the term <*dnrt*> in the epigraphic material, see Stein’s discussion on monetary terminology (2010)

²³² For the variation *bata[?] ~ tubba[?]* see also the discussion above 3.2.3.

²³³ For a full citation and discussion of this citation, see footnote 236.

In the Ethio-Semitic languages, the same negator developed in different directions. In Aksumite-period Gəʿəz it is attested in the unvocalized royal inscription RIE 192, where Christ is described as “he who is not defeated”:

RIE 192:7–8:

<i>wld</i>	<i>ʾl ʾsbh</i>	<i>gbr</i>	<i>krstś</i>	<i>d-dʾ</i>	<i>yglb</i>	<i>dr</i>
son.CST	EllaʾAsbaḥa	servant.GEN	Christ	rel-NEG	IND.conquer	enemy

“Son of Ella ʾAsbaḥa, servant of Christ, whom the enemy does not conquer”

In later Gəʿəz, this negative marker was further grammaticalized into declarative *dāʾamu*, “verily, really, indeed” (Leslau 1987:119).

Outside Gəʿəz, it is also attested in Tigrinya, as part the interrogative particle *d-* (e.g., *dəyyu*, “is it him”) (Leslau 1941:74), which was later further combined with a the negator *ʾay*, leading to the form *day* (Sjörs 2018:328–30). Furthermore, in the Ennemor dialect of Gurage, the same negator is attested as a suffix *-da*, similarly functioning as a negator (Leslau 1941:151).

The parallels between the dental negators attested in late Sabaic, the medieval “Ḥimyaritic” and several contemporary Yemeni Arabic dialects on the one hand, and similar negators in several Ethio-Semitic languages has been pointed out before (Al-Selwi 1987:90; Müller 1989:52). Sjörs already argued that Late Sabaic *dʾ* should be considered an Aksumite loanword (Sjörs 2018:290).

3.3.2. Conjunction *ḥng*

From the southern Middle Sabaic period the conjunction *ḥng* is used, occasionally with the clitic element *-n*. This conjunction probably derives from the early Sabaic construction *b-ḥg-n*, “on the authority of” (2.2.4). This conjunction is also used in the Late Sabaic inscriptions.

MQ al-Jifjif 1:7 (CSAI):

<i>w-msʾrw</i>	<i>ḥng</i>	<i>wqh-hmw</i>	<i>mrʾ-hmw</i>	<i>Sʾmr</i>
and-raised.3.PL	CONJ	command-3.M.PL	lord-3.M.PL	Sʾmr

“They raised up [the dam] as had commanded them their lord Šammar (...)”

Ja 2354:4-6 (CSAI):

<i>ḥng-n</i>	<i>whq-hw</i>	<i>ʾmrʾ-hw</i>	<i>bny Hšbh</i>
CONJ-CLT	commanded.3.PL-3.SG	lords-3.SG	bny Hšbh

“As had commanded them their lords, the Banū Haṣbaḥ (...)”

References to the same conjunction occur in the Islamic tradition. Both al-Hamdānī and Našwān al-Ḥimyarī mention it at different stages. Našwān states “*al-ḥing* is ‘example’ in the language of Ḥimyar; they say ‘these are two *ḥing*-s (*ḥingān*), meaning ‘two examples’ (*miṭlān*) (*wa-l-ḥingū l-miṭlu bi-luḡati ḥimyara yaqūlūna humā ḥingān ʾayyu miṭlān*). Similarly, al-Hamdānī’s translates *ḥng* as *miṭl*, “as” in his citation of an alleged Ḥimyaritic inscription also treated above (al-Hamdānī 1979:135):

“Himyaritic”	Classical Arabic	English
<i>la-yakūna mawtu-hā</i>	<i>ʔan yakūna mawtu-hā</i>	“That her death may be
<i>ḥiṅḡ mawtī</i>	<i>miṭla mawtī</i>	like my death.”

Našwān’s comments suggests that he might have been able to read the words *ḥng* and *ḥngn* as they occurred in the pre-Islamic inscriptions, but interpreted them as nouns, rather than as different forms of the same conjunction. Al-Hamdānī’s interpretation, on the other hand, seems to be more in line with its meaning in the Sabaic inscriptions.

Stein considers *ḥng* to be a typically South Sabaic feature. Stein suggests that the form *ḥng* may have arisen as the result of dissimilation, originally being derived from an Early Sabaic noun *ḥg*, “law; authority”. The Middle Sabaic conjunction *ḥng* would have subsequently arisen through grammaticalization, “on the authority of” . (Stein 2003:221).

There is no evidence of *ḥ[n]ḡ* surviving in any of the Arabic dialects spoken in Yemen today.

3.3.3. The inflected relative pronoun

One of the salient features of Sabaic is the inflection of the relative pronoun for gender and number. This system is attested from Old Sabaic onwards and continued to function up until the Late Sabaic period. A notable innovation of Late Sabaic is the feminine relative pronoun *t-*, which replaced earlier Sabaic *ḡ-* as well as the introduction of the common gender plural *ʔlht*, replacing earlier *ʔlw/ʔly* (masculine) and *ʔlt* (feminine).

Table 24: The relative pronouns in Late Sabaic

	SG.	DL.	PL.
M.	<i>ḡ-</i>	<i>ḡy</i>	
	<i>ḡ-</i> (CG.)	–	<i>ʔlht</i> (CG.)
F.	<i>t-</i>	?	

An inflected relative pronoun is reconstructed for Proto-Arabic.

The Safaitic corpus, for example, exhibits a masculine singular *ḡ-*, feminine singular *ḡʔt-*, and masculine plural *ḡw*.²³⁴ The forms attested in Quranic and Classical Arabic, marked by a pre-formative *al* (see the table below) are normally assumed to be derived from a compound of the definite article *al-* and the relative-demonstrative forms *ḡī-/tī-* (Van Putten 2022:280).

Noting the absence of an inflected relative pronoun in any of the Arabic vernaculars, Watson (Watson 2018:33) suggests that the presence of inflecting relative pronouns in the dialect of Riḡāl Alma², spoken near the contemporary border

²³⁴ Apart from these forms, the variants *ḡt* and *ḡʔ* are also attested for the feminine (Al-Jallad and Jaworska 2019:65)

between Yemen and Saudi Arabia reflects Sabaic influence in the language, e.g. (Watson 2018:34):

- 1) *antah rayta m-walad dā šarad*
 you.M.SG. see.2.M.SG. DEF-boy REL.M run.away.3.SG.PAST
 “did you see the boy who ran away?”
- 2) *antah rayta m-brat tā šarad*
 you.M.SG see.2.M.SG. def-girl REL.F. run.away.3.SG.PAST
 “did you see the girl who ran away?”
- 3) *gābalt im-ʿuwāl wulā sarag(u) m-maḥall*
 meet.1.SG.PAST DEF-boys REL.PL.CG steal.(3.PL.PAST) PREP-shop
 “I met the boys who stole from the shop.”

The unusual presence of the inflected relative pronoun found in the dialect of Riḡāl Alma^s may be a retention from Old Arabic. At the same time, it is not implausible that one of the reasons for its retention was prolonged contact with a pre-Islamic South Arabian language, possibly a regional variety of Sabaic.

3.3.4. Majestic plural

From the middle of the 5th century onwards, several late Sabaic inscriptions indicate the usage of a majestic plural. The earliest attested usage of this form dates to the rule of Šuraḥbiʿīl Yuʿfir and is marked by the usage of the 3rd person masculine plural verb for a 3rd person singular person:

- Gar Sharahbil A (CSAI):1,4,10
 [S²r]ḥbʿl Y^ʿfr [m](lk) S¹b² (...) br²-w w-hwtr-n (...)
 S²rḥbʿl Y^ʿfr king.GEN Saba² build.3.M.PL. and-found.INF.
 w-ʿdb-w (...)
 and-repair.3.M.PL.
 “S²rḥbʿl Y^ʿfr, king of Saba² (etc), built and constructed (...) and he repaired (...).”

The majestic plural was also used in inscriptions dating to the reign of Yūsuf As²ar Yat²ar (1.4.2):

- Ry 507 3-4 (CSAI):
 mlkn Ysʿf ʿs¹ʿr Yt²r k-dhr-w qls⁴n w-hrg-w
 king.DEF Ysʿf ʿs¹ʿr Yt²r CONJ-burn.3.M.PL. church-DEF CONJ-kill.3.M.PL.
 ʿḥbs²n b-Zfr
 Ethiopians PREP-Zfr
 “The king Yūsuf ʿAs²ar Yat²ar, when he burned the church and killed the Ethiopians in Zafār.”

A parallel phenomenon is found Aksumite inscriptions from the reign of Ezana (c. 350 AD). An important difference, however, is the fact that the majestic plural is marked by the first-person plural:

RIÉ/DAE 10:1

<i>[ʕE]zānā</i>	<i>waləda</i>	<i>(ʕəlla) ʕamīdā</i>	<i>bəʕesya</i>	<i>[ha]lən</i>
<i>ʕEzāna</i>	son.GEN	<i>Ella Amida</i>	man.GEN	Ḥalən
<i>nəguša</i>	<i>ʕaksum (...)</i>	<i>sobe</i>	<i>gafʕa-na (...)</i>	<i>wa-ḳattal-na</i>
king.GEN	Aksum	when	attack.1.PL	and-siege-3.M.PL
<i>saʕne</i>	<i>wa-ṣawante</i>			
Saʕne	and-Ṣawante			

“Ezāna, son of Ella Amida, of the tribe Ḥalən, king of Aksum (...), when he attacked us (...) and when we besieged Saʕne and Ṣawante (...)”

Furthermore, the majestic plural appears to have fallen out of use after Ezana’s conversion to Christianity (Littmann 1913:30):

DAE 11:7

<i>ba-ḥayla</i>	<i>ʕəgzīʕa</i>	<i>kʷall</i>	<i>ṭabaʕ-ku</i>	<i>noba</i>
by-power.GEN	lord.GEN	everything	campaign-1.SG.	Noba

“By the power of the Lord of All, I campaigned against Noba (...)”

The presence of the majestic plural in the Late Sabaic inscriptions and their connection to Ethiopia have been recognized before (Stein 2003:168, Marrassini 2010:15–16). An Aksumite antecedent is not impossible, although the difference between the 1st person and 3rd person plural has yet to be fully resolved.

It is worth pointing out that similar plurals of respect appear to have been common in the broader region at the time. An interesting parallel with the Gəʕəz form is the ‘divine plural’ as it occurs in the Quran, wherein God refers to himself using the 1st person plural in several instances, for example 11:94 and 30:47:

<i>wa-lammā</i>	<i>ḡāʕa</i>	<i>ʕamru-nā</i>	<i>naḡḡay-nā</i>	<i>ṣuʕayban</i>
and-ADV	came	command-1.PL	saved-1.PL.	Ṣuʕayb.ACC

“And when our command came, we saved Ṣuʕayb”

<i>wa-laqad</i>	<i>ʕarsal-nā</i>	<i>min</i>	<i>qabli-ka</i>	<i>rusulan</i>
and-PART	sent-1.PL	PREP	before-2.M.SG	prophets

“And we have sent prophets before you”

Furthermore, there is curious correspondence between the majestic plural found in Sabaic and the so-called ‘plurals of respect’ in Amharic and Tigrinya. In these languages, a distinct pronoun developed for the 2nd and 3rd person which takes 3rd person plural agreement. Compare Amharic *əssu yəməṭṭal*, “he will come” versus *əssəččaw yəməṭṭalu*, “he [HON] will come” (Leslau 1995:46–47) and Tigrinya *nəssu* (standard) vs *nəssāmu* (polite) (Melles 2001:32–33). Although it is admittedly unlikely that these forms arose due to contact with Sabaic, it is possible that similar constructions of denoting respect existed in the Red Sea region during the late antique period.

3.4. Lexicon

Loanwords are ostensibly the most visible evidence of language contact. Broadly speaking, words are borrowed between languages for one of two reasons: necessity or prestige (Campbell 2013:59). When new items or concepts are introduced into a linguistic community, foreign terminology is often borrowed as well. Depending on the situation, certain terms can be borrowed because they are considered to be more prestigious. A notable example from English is the wholesale borrowing of terminology related to cuisine from Norman French, which was the language spoken by the elite of Britain following the conquest of 1066 (Hock 2021:412–14).

Determining which terms are borrowed and which are shared retentions is not always self-evident, particularly in the case of the ‘South Semitic’ scripts, as their lack of the (consistent) representation of vowels hampers cross-linguistic comparison (Beeston 1994:39). Nevertheless, some factors allow us to establish which terms are borrowed (Pat-El 2013:314):

a. Orthography.

Fluctuations in the representation of a word are often an indication that they were borrowed, particularly at an early stage when no orthographic standards have been established. Uncertainty or different opinions amongst scribes can lead to varying representations of the same loanword (Onysko 2007:62)

b. (Morpho-)phonology.

The phonological shape of a word can also indicate whether or not a term was borrowed, particularly if its etymological counterpart is also attested in the recipient language. This can also extend to the morphophonological level, where loans containing certain morphological elements can indicate borrowing.

c. Semantics.

In some cases, the borrowed term carries a specialized meaning, usually representing a new idea or concept. This can either lead to the introduction of new terminology, or the ‘recycling’ of their etymological counterpart in the recipient language.

These factors may, and often do, co-occur. For example, the Arabic term *al-muhaymin*, ‘the guardian’ derives from an Aramaic verb *haymana*. Although eventually etymologically related to the root *ʾamana*, ‘to be safe’ (retained in Arabic (Al-Jallad and Jaworska 2019:45)), the presence of the causative *h-* points towards an Aramaic origin. Furthermore, its usage in the Qurʾan (59:24) as a deific points to a particular, specialized kind of religious terminology.²³⁵

²³⁵ *wa-huwa ʿallaḏī lā ilāha ʿillā huwa l-maliku l-quddūsu l-sallāmu l-muʿminu l-muhayminu l-ʿazīzu l-ḡabbāru l-mutakkabiru subḥana llāhi ʿammā yuṣṣrikūna.*

The South Arabian material provides multiple examples of these factors as well:

- a. The Hebrew name *Yosef* is found in the South Arabian inscriptions written in three distinct ways: 1) *Ys'f* (e.g., Ry 507, 508); 2) *Yw'sf* (Ja 1028); and 3) *Yws'f* (SR-Na^d 9). The orthographic variations indicate a lack of consensus amongst South Arabian scribes on how to best represent a foreign name.
- b. In several Sabaic inscriptions from Radmān, an area that had previously been under Qatabanian control, the causative is marked with *s'*. Although these inscriptions are otherwise written in Sabaic, the *s'*-causative is a clear indication of Qatabanic influence (Stein 2003:8)
- c. Much of the religious terminology in the inscriptions from the monotheist period are borrowed directly from Aramaic, Syriac, and Gəʿəz. Examples include Aramaic *məsg(ə)dā* > *ms'gd(n)*, “place of worship”; Syriac *rōhā qoddešā* > *rḥ qds'²³⁶* and Greek *ekklēsia* > *qls'n*, “church”.

Many earlier studies have already focused on lexical borrowing in South Arabia, either from or into Sabaic and other pre-Islamic South Arabian languages. Rather than repeating the findings of these studies, it is perhaps more useful to categorize their findings. For example, the lexical items listed in al-Selwi’s *Jemenitische Wörter* can be categorized as follows:

- a. Agriculture (50), botany (43) and geology (12)
- b. Geographical features (41)
- c. Material culture (30) and architecture (21)
- d. Water management (18)
- e. Social organization (13)

The distribution of these terms is not surprising. Agriculture and water management were highly developed in South Arabia, so it is entirely expected that such terms would be borrowed into local Arabic dialects. The same principle applies to lexemes related to botany, geological features. As Müller (2014:92) points out, South Arabia had also made significant advances in architecture during antiquity, so terms related to construction techniques would also have been easily transmitted.

However, it is worth focusing on some of the less ‘trivial’ lexemes borrowed both into and from Sabaic. Starting from the 2nd to 3rd century AD onwards, terms of both Ethiopic and Old Arabic origin referring to social organization filter into the Sabaic inscriptions. Apart from overt references to Ethiopians, referred to as either Aksumites (*?ks'mn*) or Ethiopians (*?hbs²n*; *hbs²n*; *hbs²t*), the terms *ḥzb*, “war band” and *?šdn*, “settlements” are thought to be derived from Gəʿəz *ḥəzb* and *ʿa?²šād* (sg. *ʿašād*), respectively (Beeston 1994:; Hatke 2020:293)

²³⁶ But note the lack of the definite article, as compared to *ms'gdn*, suggesting the word was borrowed through Gəʿəz.

Similarly, in lieu of Sabaic *s²b* and *ʔhgr*, the terms *ʕs²rt* and *ʔdwr/ʔdyr* are found in two Central Sabaic inscriptions to refer to social organization for tribal groups originating to the north of the South Arabian cultural area.²³⁷ These two terms are likely derived from Old Arabic *ʕašīrat*, “tribe” and *ʔadyār*, “settlements”, more commonly found in North Arabian inscriptions (Al-Jallad and Jaworska 2019:55, 64; Beeston 1994:41).²³⁸

Vice versa, the Sabaic terms referring to social organization preserved by the Islamic tradition warrant some additional discussion. The retention of salient political terms, such as *qayl*, “prince; king” and *mihlāf*, “province” support the notion that the basic political structures remained in place into the early Islamic period. Although this may appear to be a relatively trivial observation, it is precisely the presence of such lexical items that allow for a more accurate reconstruction of social change in late antique South Arabia.

3.5. Discussion

This chapter gave an overview of the linguistic features that are shared in the languages in South Arabia. The most important conclusions are as follows:

Firstly, the commonalities between these languages extend far beyond the scope of lexicon. There are numerous shared phonological, morphological, and syntactical features, whose presence in the languages of South Arabia appear to have been the result of language contact. Furthermore, these features are derived from different Semitic strata, including Late Sabaic, varieties of Old Arabic, and notably, at least one Ethio-Semitic language, possibly a spoken form of Gəʕəz.

The next question is how to interpret this material. To again take the example of the merger of the sibilants *s¹* and *s³* in Late Sabaic. In this section it was discussed that this merger can be reasonably attributed to substrate influence from Old Arabic. A logical conclusion is that the scribes who were actually writing the Late Sabaic inscriptions no longer distinguished between the two sibilants in their native language. This would then lead to uncertainty about which of the sounds ought to be written, leading to the inconsistent appearance of both *s¹* and *s³* in the Late Sabaic period.

The transfer of linguistic features was far from unilateral. As much as Late Sabaic appears to have been influenced by the surrounding languages, it, too, exerted linguistic pressure on the languages surrounding it. A good example is that of the *k*-based suffix conjugation, attested in multiple South Arabian dialects of Arabic. Seeing how this feature is attested only in the mountainous areas of

²³⁷ The Central Middle Sabaic inscription Ja 574 refers to the “settlements” (*ʔdwr[m]*) of the Aksumites: “they came into conflict [...] with twenty-five patrols from the settlements of the Aksumites, Gmdn and ʕkm” (7–8: *w-hrbw [...] b-hmyt hmsʔt w-ʔsʔry ʔdwrw bn ʔdwr ʔksʔmn w-Gmdn w-ʕkm*)

²³⁸ The Central South Sabaic inscription ʕAbadān 1 refers to the northern Arabian tribe of ʕAbd al-Qays as *ʕs²rt ʕbdqysʔn* (line 29).

South Arabia, its presence there can be ascribed to linguistic influence from Late Sabaic.

However, merely showing that such features spread as the result of linguistic contact does not yet say anything about the social and historical circumstances under which such contact occurred. This is to be the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4:

Linguistic change in late antique South Arabia

The previous chapter has shown that many phonological, morphological, and syntactical features spread between the South Arabian languages of the late antique period. These were the following. Sabaic, the administrative language of the Sabaean and Himyarite states, which functioned as prestige language in South Arabia. Secondly, varieties of Old Arabic, spoken by tribal groups that originated to the north of South Arabian cultural area. And thirdly, an Ethio-Semitic language, most likely Aksumite Gəʿəz, the earliest evidence of which goes back to the first Aksumite military intervention in South Arabia.

The goal of this chapter is to contextualize the contact between these languages by examining the historical and social settings under which it occurred. In the introduction it was mentioned that in the field of contact linguistics, most scholars have to come to agree there are no innate restrictions on transfer. At the same time, the linguistic transfer of structural elements, such as morphology and syntax, tend to occur only under situations of prolonged and intense contact. In such situations, one language usually enjoys more social prestige than the other. This means that structural change can reflect on the social environment under which different languages interacted with each other.

This chapter seeks to establish the social environment of late antique South Arabia by analyzing the features enumerated in the previous chapter. In doing so, it will also provide a tentative chronology during which this language contact take place, roughly divided into a pre-Islamic and early Islamic period. Furthermore, this chapter also discusses the role of writing during the aforementioned periods and the shift between the South Arabian and Arabic scripts in South Arabia. It will also contextualize the attestations of the South Arabian script during the early Islamic period, both in the form of epigraphy as well as in medieval Islamic scholarship.

4.1. Linguistic change in South Arabia: preludes

Before the 4th century, South Arabia had already been a linguistically diverse area. Apart from the non-Sabaic Epigraphic South Arabian languages, inscriptions originating from the northern edges of the South Arabian cultural area point to the existence of various Semitic languages. The linguistic features exhibited by these varieties defy straightforward classification.

4.1.1. The 1st to 4th century AD

An example of such an early linguistic variety that does not easily lend itself to linguistic classification is Amiritic, attested from the 1st century BC to the 2nd century AD. The language of the Amiritic inscriptions exhibits features similar to Sabaic, and on the other, shares isoglosses with what would later be considered Classical Arabic. Amiritic first emerges following the disintegration of the state of Maʿīn, which had been completed by the 1st century AD.²³⁹ From this moment onwards local ethno-linguistic tribal groups in the Yemeni Ġawf (an area on the border of the South Arabian cultural area) appears to have asserted themselves politically.

Apart from the linguistic features distinguishing them from the Minaeans that had preceded them, these tribes also adhered to different social, political, and religious traditions than had been common in South Arabia before then (Schiettecatte and Arbach 2020:268). For example, they replaced the Minaean system of monarchy with a tribal council and introduced the worship of several, likely originally North Arabian deities to the region. The most influential of these was Dū Samāwī, whose worship would come to spread over South Arabia in the centuries following.

At the same time, the inscriptions left by the members of these tribes are characterized by features that, from a Sabaic perspective, are non-standard. The most important of these features are summarized in table 25.

Apart from these various grammatical elements, the Amiritic inscriptions are further characterized by other lexical items that are notably distinct from that of standard Sabaic. These include the verbs *ḍrb*, “to beat” (Sab. *sʿbt*) and *ḡsʿl*, “to wash”; (Sab. *rḥd*)²⁴⁰ as well as the noun *ḥyn*, “time”, which is clearly related to the Arabic *ḥīn* (id.), but which does not appear in any other Sabaic inscriptions.^{241, 242}

²³⁹ Traditionally the Amiritic inscriptions are dated to between the 1st century BC and 1st/2nd century AD. However, because no inscriptions containing dating formulae have been attested, this range is based entirely on paleographic grounds. It is possible that the span of the Amiritic writing school is broader, although in light of extra-linguistic evidence (the re-assertion of Sabaeen political control over the Jawf) it seems likely that the Amiritic inscriptions ceased to be written at this stage.

²⁴⁰ Note that outside of Arabic the root *ḡsl* is not attested in the sense “to wash”; whereas *rḥd* is attested in Geʿez, Mehri, Shehret, as well as Safaitic (Leslau 1987:466).

²⁴¹ There is of course also an Arabic noun *ḥīn*, pl. *ʿahyān*, although it is difficult to establish whether this is a denominal form.

²⁴² Also note the attestation of causative of the verb *nwr* (**nawwara* [?]) “to light;” which is otherwise only attested in the Sabaic inscriptions in the C-stem, i.e., *hnr* (**hanāra* [?]), idem.

Table 25: Comparison of specific features in Standard Middle Sabaic, Minaic, Amiritic and Old Arabic (adapted from Stein 2007).

	“Standard” Middle Sabaic	Minaic	Amiritic	Old Arabic
preposition „from“	<i>bn</i>	<i>bn</i>	<i>mn</i>	<i>min</i>
conjunction „when“	<i>(b-)ywm</i>	<i>(b)-ywm</i>	<i>ʔd</i>	<i>ʔd</i>
introductory particle	<i>dt</i>	<i>hn</i>	<i>hn</i>	<i>ʔn</i>
negative particle	<i>ʔl</i>	<i>l[h]m</i>	<i>lm</i>	<i>lam</i>
1 st & 2 nd person past tense	<i>-k</i>	<i>-k</i>	<i>-t</i>	<i>-t</i>
Sibilants	<i>s¹, s², s³</i>	<i>s¹, s², s³</i>	<i>s¹, s²</i>	<i>s¹/s³; s²</i>
causative stem	<i>h-</i>	<i>s¹-</i>	<i>h-</i>	<i>ʔ-</i>
definite article	<i>-n</i>	<i>-n</i>	<i>-n</i>	<i>h-; hn; hl-; ʔl; Ø</i>
mimation	<i>yes</i>	<i>occasionally</i>	<i>occasionally</i>	<i>no</i>

The presence of non-standard features in the Amiritic inscriptions has led scholars to debate the linguistic nature of these texts. For example, Robin has called Amiritic a pseudo-Sabaic (*pseudo-sabéen*), used by various North Arabian tribes as a *koiné* for intertribal communication (Robin 1991c:75, 1992:977). Macdonald, however, thinks that these features are the result of non-Sabaic speakers imperfectly attempting to reproduce Sabaic or, alternatively, was a form of spoken Sabaic heavily influenced by a non-Sabaic language (Macdonald 2000:56–7). Similarly, Stein (2007:30) states that Amiritic can be ‘seen as a branch of Ancient South Arabian, primarily a Sabaic dialect, whose admittedly significant influences, particularly in the syntactical and lexical realms, are the result of neighboring North Arabian cultures. In a recent evaluation of the inscriptions, al-Jallad describes the language of the Amiritic inscriptions as representing an ‘areal hybrid’, similar to both the ‘Himyaritic’ described by medieval scholars (Al-Jallad 2013: 228–29).

Whichever way one interprets the features of the Amiritic inscriptions, their mixed character points towards a complex linguistic situation on the edges of the South Arabian cultural area. Inscriptions found at the town of Naḡrān and the oasis as Qaryat al-Faw, both important centers on the north-to-south trading route attest to other linguistic varieties existing in the same region.

The language of the Rbbʔl b. Hf^m inscription is another example of a variety defying straightforward classification. Like the Amiritic inscriptions, the Rbbl b. Hf^m inscription is written in the South Arabian script and was long understood as one of the earliest examples of Old Arabic (Kropp 1990:13, Macdonald 2000:50). For example, the Rbbl b. Hf^m inscription is characterized by the presence of the definite article *ʔl-/hal-*, causative *ʔf^l* and the collapse of the triphthongs, which are features that are all attested in Arabic as well. At the same time, the language of the inscription displays the occasional use of mimation (as in Sabaic) as well as the particle *ʔdky*, attested in Dadanitic (Al-Jallad 2014).

4.1.2. The 4th to 5th centuries AD

From the 4th century AD, the linguistic situation in Central and North Arabia begins to change. The various North Arabian scripts of these regions disappear in favor of the Paleo-Arabic script (2.5.1.) (Robin et al. 2014:1037). Apart from the adoption of a single system of writing, the inscriptions from this period are characterized by the presence of certain shared cultural elements, most notably the widespread usage of the Nabataean annual calendar with its starting date of 106 AD (Alzoubi 2016:306).

These processes co-occurred with the establishment of Ḥimyarite political control over the area. At this time, the Ḥimyarites had established political control over all of South Arabia and begun extending their dominance into the central Arabian desert. Rather than assuming direct control over the region, the Ḥimyarites instead promoted the rulers of the tribal confederation of Kinda (*Kdt*) with their capital at Qaryat al-Faw to rule as their suzerains (Gajda 2009:180).²⁴³ It is likely that political pressure, which at this point came to be exerted from three different directions (i.e., Ḥimyarite South Arabia, Persian Mesopotamia, and Roman Syria), laid the ground for the beginnings of a shared cultural central-northern Arabian identity, which was to strengthen in the centuries following.²⁴⁴

This period also saw the increased settlement of Old Arabic speakers in South Arabia. The previous chapter (3.2.3) discussed the presence of the nasal prefixed definite article in both the medieval ‘Ḥimyaritic’ as well as in several contemporary Arabic dialects. Although there is no evidence for a prepositioned definite article in Sabaic (or the other ESA languages), it has occasionally been suggested that the nasal article was derived from one of these languages. Although this is not impossible,²⁴⁵ it would require at least one unattested ad-hoc sound change.

Instead, it is likelier that the nasal article spread to South Arabia in the pre-Islamic period, representing a distinct outcome of Central Semitic demonstrative *hn* (Al-Jallad 2021).²⁴⁶ By the 7th century, the *al-* article had become dominant in most Arabic dialects, indicating that the **²an*-article must have spread to South Arabia before then. This, in turn, suggests Old Arabic speakers must have been present in South Arabia before this change took place.

²⁴³ It is during the same time that the term *'rb* (*'a'rāb*; *ʔa'rūb* [?]) begins to appear in the South Arabian inscriptions. The meaning of this term has led to much speculation, although it seems likely that at this time, it refers to mercenaries employed by the Ḥimyarites after their conquest of South Arabia (Webb 2016:34)

²⁴⁴ While the inhabitants of Central and North Arabia may not have yet begun to call themselves ‘Arabs’ yet, it does seem likely that the socio-political environment of the 5th to 6th centuries allowed for the development of a shared cultural identity. Al-Jallad points at the usage of *ʔrb* as an ethnic term in a Safaitic inscription, pushing back the notion of an endonym based on a term derived from *'rb* to at least the 4th century AD (Al-Jallad 2020:8).

²⁴⁵ Note, for example, the prepositioned definite article in Jutland Danish, which may have arisen as the result of contact with speakers of English (Perridon 1997).

²⁴⁶ Al-Jallad notes the presence of the *ʔam*-article in an unpublished inscription from the Tabuk region.

Furthermore, the retention of the internal or apophonic passive (3.2.7) in several South Arabian Arabic dialects, including those spoken in North Yemen, in the Hadramawt and in Dhofar (Oman) points to a pre-Islamic migration of Arabic speakers to these regions. In the case of the northern Yemeni dialects, its presumed presence in Sabaic could have strengthened its usage there as well. It is possible that during this time, Arabic speakers in Hadramawt and western Oman came into contact with speakers of (proto-)Modern South Arabian, from where the internal passive was (re-)introduced into these languages.

4.2. Linguistic change in late pre-Islamic South Arabia (504 – 650 AD)

The collapse of the South Arabian political system and the cessation of the associated monumental writing tradition means that analyzing linguistic change is one of the few ways to study the history of late pre-Islamic and early Islamic South Arabia. The linguistic material presented in chapter 3 indicates a high degree of structural contact between various Semitic languages in late antique South Arabia. The socio-political implications of this contact have not yet received sufficient attention.

During the first half of this period, Late Sabaic was still maintained as South Arabia's prestige language, maintaining its role in official purposes. This period or the period immediately preceding it saw the most significant amount of linguistic pressure from Sabaic on neighboring languages, leading to the transfer of morphological and syntactic features. Examples of such features include the 1st and 2nd person *k*-based verbal suffix (3.2.1.), which is still in use in most of the Yemeni highlands (Behnstedt 2016:192–93). A similar phenomenon is the ^ʔ*aCCūC* internal plural (3.2.2), whose contemporary usage is now unevenly distributed (Behnstedt 2016:84).

Not all features seem to have survived into the contemporary period. The most notable example of this is the conjunction *hiŋǧ*, “as” (3.3.4). Although this conjunction appears to have been relatively productive during the medieval period, it does not seem to have survived into any contemporary South Arabian dialects.

The prestigious, possibly even artificial, position of Late Sabaic did not mean it was impervious to outside influence. A notable example of such linguistic influence is the introduction of the majestic plural (3.3.5), which may have arisen under Aksumite cultural pressure. A clearer example of Ethiopic influence on Sabaic is that of the negative adverb *dʔ* (3.3.1), which points towards a significant Ethiopic substrate.

This, in turn, suggests that the presence of Ethiopic speakers in South Arabia remained large enough to warrant such a strong effect on the form of Sabaic adopted by the Himyarites. It is not impossible to imagine a situation in which local Aksumite speakers of *Gəʕəz* continued to reside in South Arabia, while maintaining mercantile and diplomatic connections with Ethiopia. Furthermore, the descendant of the negative particle *daw* and its allomorphs remain in use only

in the Yemeni Tihama, coincidentally the region with the strongest cultural and political ties to Aksumite Ethiopia.

This claim has some significant implications for the history of the socio-political situation in late antique South Arabia. The Aksumite invasion is usually framed within the context of a historical presence in the Tihāma and Naḡrān during the 2nd and 3rd century AD. Following the Aksumites' military withdrawal from South Arabia, their claim to the region was based on political fiction. The invasion of South Arabia in the 6th century was the result of an irredentist Aksumite agenda fueled by religious ideology (Hatke 2011:53–59). The linguistic evidence may lead to a partial re-evaluation of this notion.

The second half of this period saw the abandonment of Late Sabaic in its official capacity. At this stage, determining the directionality of linguistic contact becomes more difficult. For example, the nominalizer **məqtāl* (3.2.4) has parallels in both Sabaic and Gəʕəz. Its presence in Old and medieval Arabic texts as well as in contemporary Yemeni Arabic dialects can plausibly be attributed to either a South Arabian or Ethio-Semitic antecedent language. A similar argument can be made for the seemingly unusual forms (3.1.5.), whose etymological background defies a simple path from Late Sabaic into Arabic.

4.3. Linguistic change in early Islamic South Arabia (650 – 850 AD)

From the 7th century onward, South Arabia became an integral part of the Islamic polity. This period saw the participation of several South Arabian tribal groups and individuals in the Islamic conquests and their settlement in the subjugated provinces. The participation of South Arabians in the early Islamic conquests will be expanded upon in chapter 5.

The political crystallization of Islam during the 8th century, however, solidified the position of Classical Arabic as South Arabia's new prestige language. This, however, marginalized varieties of Arabic that had been spoken in the region before the standardization of Classical Arabic (2.5.1). As a result, the medieval scholars working within the Classical Arabic framework came to identify both non-Classical local varieties of Arabic and the pre-Islamic South Arabian language(s) under the umbrella term 'Ḥimyaritic'. For this reason, etymologically unrelated features, such as the Old Arabic prefixed nasal article *am-/an-* and the 1st- and 2nd pronominal suffix *-kV* were both seen as 'Ḥimyaritic'.

Despite the cessation of the South Arabian monumental writing tradition, some epigraphic material from the early Islamic period survives. These inscriptions, written in both South Arabian monumental and cursive letters as well as in the Arabic script, offer an invaluable insight into linguistic change during the early Islamic period:

Firstly, these inscriptions show that the lateral article *al-* had been steadily making inroads into South Arabia by the 7th/8th century. Around the 6th to 7th century, the nasal article had functionally disappeared from (nearly all) other varieties of

early Arabic, having been replaced with the lateral article *al-*. Two inscriptions from Ġabal Umm Layla, about 50 kilometers north of Ṣaʿda, serve as an example. Written in the South Arabian script, these inscriptions (Robin Umm Laylā 2 and 3) were written next to a Central Middle Sabaic inscription (Robin Umm Layla 1/Ja 2877) (see also 4.5.2.) (Robin 1976):

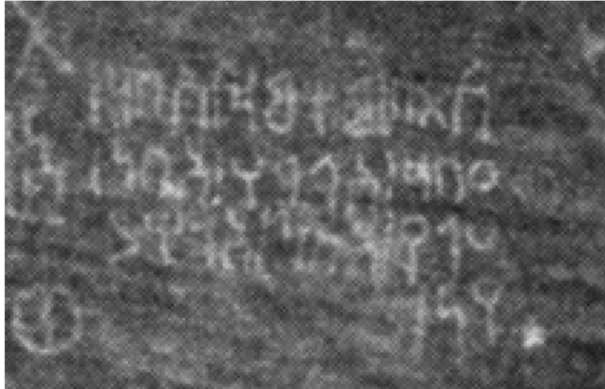


Figure 5: Robin Umm Layla 2, DASI)

Robin Umm Laylā 2: *ktb mḥmd ʿbn ʿbd ʿllh ʿbn ʿly ʿbn ʿlḥryn*
 “Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥryn wrote (this).”

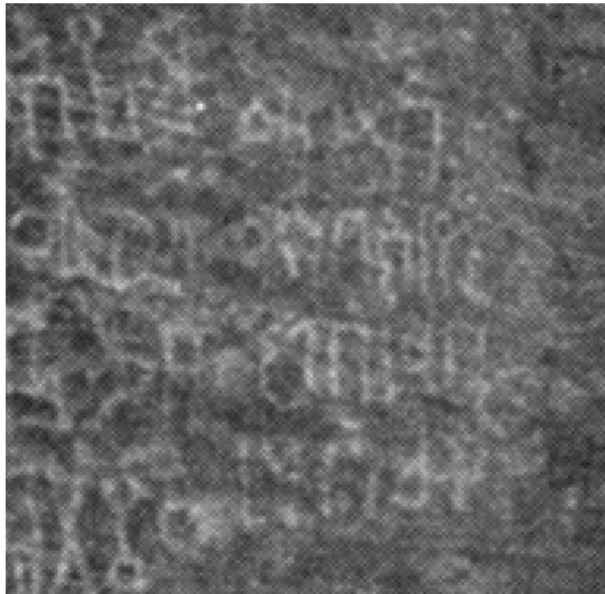


Figure 6: Robin Umm Layla 3 (DASI)

Robin Umm Laylā 3: *ktb ʿly ʿbn ʿbd ʿlḥmʿn*
 “ʿAlī b. ʿAbd al-Raḥman wrote (this)”

Although these inscriptions were written in the South Arabian script, their language is Arabic. Clear indications of this are both the presence of the noun *ʿbn* instead of Sabaic *bn* and the verb *ktb*, “to write”, instead of Sabaic *sʿtr*. The attestation of the names ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (*ʿbd ʿlrahmʿn*) and ʿAbd Allah (*ʿbd ʿllh*), both of which demonstrate the presence of the *al*-based personal names in South Arabia.



Figure 7: Ṭawq b. al-Hayṭam inscription, South Arabian portion (adapted from al-Said 2004).²⁴⁷

The Tawq b. al-Hayṭam inscription, named after the texts’ author, are a case in point: the first two inscriptions consist of the author’s name and patronymic. The third is a brief invocation, which reads as follows:

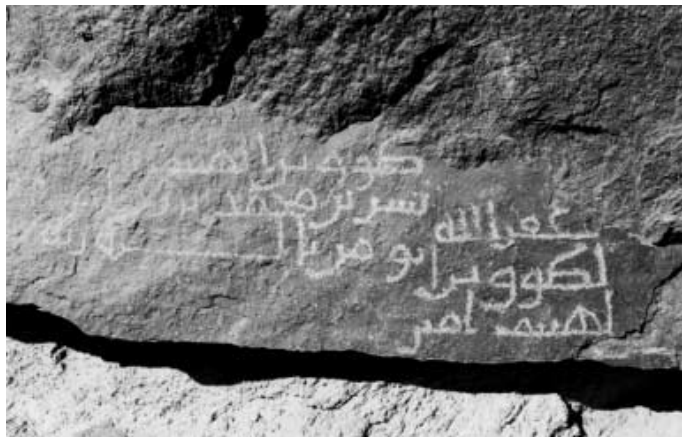


Figure 8: Ṭawq b. al-Hayṭam inscription (al-Said 2004)

Al-Said 2004: *ḡfr ʿllh l-ṭwq bn ʿlhyṭm*
ḡafira llāhu li-ṭawq bin al-hayṭam
 “May God forgive Ṭawq, son of al-Hayṭam”

²⁴⁷ For purposes of clarity, I have manipulated the picture in an image processor by reversing the colors and increasing both the highlights and shadows. Deep gratitude to Professor Al-Said for allowing his picture to be re-used in this dissertation.

These inscriptions are particularly interesting as they were written in both Arabic and South Arabian. The South Arabian portion of the inscription, which only contains the personal name and patronymic nevertheless indicates the presence of the definite article *al-* in the region.

Finally, the Ġabal Ḍabūb inscription, which is one of the few longer texts written in the South Arabian script from the early Islamic period may also point towards a stratum of Arabic that contained an (assimilating) lateral definite article. The inscription reads as follows:

J-Ḍ: (1) *bsmlh rḥmn rḥmn rb s'mwt* (2) *r(zq)n mfdlk w'ṭrn mḥh s'kmt 'ymn*

Based on the script, Al-Ḥāḡḡ and Faq'as²⁴⁸ interpret the language of the inscription as a mixture of Arabic and Late Sabaic²⁴⁸ and give two possible interpretations of the text (al-Ḥāḡḡ and Faq'as 2018).

“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent, Lord of the Heavens, the Provider, who makes you [mankind] more preferable, who likewise gives you his blessings, because he gives you his faith.”²⁴⁹

“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent, Lord of the Heavens, the Provider, [I ask] your bounty through your grace, and that you grant its essence (of wisdom) through faith.”²⁵⁰

Al-Jallad argues against reading the language of the Ġabal Ḍabūb inscription as Sabaic. Instead, he sees it as an early form of Arabic, simply written in South Arabian cursive letters. As Al-Jallad points out, Al-Ḥāḡḡ's and Faq'as's Sabaic-oriented interpretation faces several problems. For example, whereas they interpret the final *-n* seen in several words (*rḥmn*, *rzqn*) as the Sabaic definite article, they do not explain why it is lacking the first theonym *raḥmān* and the noun *samawāt* (*s'mwt*). Instead, Al-Jallad suggests interpreting these final *-n*'s as reflecting the first-person pronominal suffix. Al-Jallad thus offers an alternative interpretation of the inscription (Al-Jallad 2022):

bismillah r-rāḥmān raḥim-nā rabb s-samawāt rzuq-nā mif-faḍli-ka

“In the name of God, the *Raḥmān*; have Mercy upon us, O lord of the heavens, satisfy by means of your favor, and grant us its essence (i.e., wisdom)”.

Al-Jallad further mentions the nouns *rḥm* and *s'mwt* as reflecting an unmarked assimilating definite article (e.g., **Vr-raḥīm*; **Vs-samawāt*), which would also be

²⁴⁸ As the authors state: “because the author began his miniscule inscription with the *basmala*, following that with [both] South Arabian and Classical Arabic forms” (*li-ʿanna ṣāḥiba l-naqš ftataḥa naqša-hū l-zabūriyya bi-ʿāyati l-tawḥīd (bismillāhi l-raḥmāni l-raḥīmi) wa-ʿaḡaba-hā bi-ʿalfāzin musnadiyyatin wa-ʿuḥrā ʿarabiyyatun faṣīḥatun*) (al-Ḥāḡḡ and Faq'as 2018:24)

²⁴⁹ *bismillāh l-raḥmān l-raḥīm l-razzāq [ʿallāḏī] mufaḍḏilu-ka [ʿayyuhā al-ʿinsān] wa-l-murḏifu niʿama-hū ʿalay-ka ʿaḡā-ka l-ʿimāna.*

²⁵⁰ See also the discussion about morphological translation above (4.2.1.2).

found in the construction *rb s'mwt*. Additionally, it is notable that the root *rzq* is not attested in the pre-Islamic South Arabian epigraphy, whereas it occurs in this inscription.²⁵¹ Orthographic practices too, seem to suggest Arabic rather than Sabaic.

The Arabic strata containing the definite article *al-* likely came into contact with a local variety of Late Sabaic. The most important indication of this is the distribution of the *k*-based pronominal suffixes of the 1st and 2nd person (masculine) verbal conjugation. This phenomenon is generally absent from Arabic dialects containing the nasal definite article,²⁵² possibly indicating a heavier degree of Arabization in those regions.

The apparent mutual exclusion of the *k*-based suffix conjugation and the nasal definite article may find some support in the medieval Islamic tradition. In a citation of the medieval ‘Himyaritic’, al-Hamdānī gives the following example:

“The (inhabitants of the) land of Sufyān b. ʔArḥab is comprehensible (*fuṣahāʔ*), except for when they say ʔ*am-raḡul* (the man), *qayyad baʔirā-ka* (“tie up your two camels”) and *raʔaytu ʔaḥawāka* (“I saw your two brothers”)”

Here al-Hamdānī intends to draw attention to the ‘incorrect’ usage of the dual in object position, as according to Classical Arabic the forms should be *baʔirayka* and *ʔaḥawayka*, respectively. However, in this passage al-Hamdānī makes no reference to the *k*-based suffix conjugation, although he was evidently aware of its existence (see also the discussion in 3.2.1). Although this may be a coincidence, its absence here is at least curious.²⁵³

Notably, those regions of contemporary Yemen and southwestern Saudi-Arabia that contain both the *k*-based suffix conjugation and the nasal definite article also display other significant forms of Late Sabaic influence. For example, the preposition *sī-*, “to; towards” (3.2.5.), which evidently goes back to the Late Sabaic form *sʔ-* is attested in al-Nāẓir, spoken in the same region. Similarly, the presence of the inflected relative pronoun (3.3.4.), whose morphology is particularly close to that of Late Sabaic points towards a particular intense linguistic contact in what is now northern Yemen.

²⁵¹ Considering that Arabic *rizq* is a Middle Persian loanword (< *rōčig*, “daily bread” (Jeffery 2007:142)) its presence in the Ġabal Ḍabūb inscription may in fact reflect the first attested usage of this word in Arabic.

²⁵² With the notable exception of certain dialects spoken in the area around Ṣaʕda (Behnstedt 1987:26, 54)

²⁵³ On the other hand, in his *Tārīḥ madīnat Ṣanʕāʔ*, al-Rāzī gives the example *raʔayku bi-n-ḥulm ka-waladku ibnan min ṭīb* (Landberg 1886:112.)

4.4. Was late antique South Arabia bi- or multilingual?

The linguistic features discussed in the previous section raises the question whether bi- or multilingualism was widespread in South Arabia. The presence or absence of bi- or multilingual inscriptions itself is not enough to determine this, as the different languages could have been written by different scribes or by a highly educated scribal class who were competent enough to compose the same text in different languages.

Instead, the linguistic character of the texts themselves may indicate whether or not multilingualism was widespread in South Arabia or not. The previous chapter demonstrated that the degree of linguistic contact between the various languages of the region extended beyond the level of lexicon: instead, evidence for the transfer of features includes phonology, morphology, and syntax.

As mentioned before (see *method*, p. 18-20), the likelihood with which certain linguistic features are transferred over others can be mapped onto a scale, referred to as a borrowability scale.

The borrowability scale (Matras and Sakel 2007, 61):

nouns, conjunctions > verbs > discourse markers > adjectives > interjections > adverbs > other particles, adpositions > numerals > pronouns > derivational affixes > inflectional affixes

As a rule, the further down the borrowability scale, the greater the likelihood of intense contact between languages. Although ‘intensity’ is difficult to define precisely, Thomason (2011:66) roughly defines three main indicators: 1) duration of linguistic contact, i.e., the longer the contact, the higher the likelihood of linguistic interference; 2) the size of the linguistic communities: if one of the communities involved is smaller than the other, the greater the likelihood they will take over features from the larger linguistic community; and 3) if one of the linguistic communities is socio-economically dominant, the greater the chance the non-dominant community will take over linguistic features from the dominant group.

The various linguistic features discussed in chapter 3 can help establish whether or not there is evidence for bi- or multilingualism in South Arabia during the late antique period.

4.4.1. Phonological arguments

Firstly, the phonological features discussed in chapter 3 indicate the following:

The merger of the sibilants s' and s^3 during the late Sabaic period (3.1.3.) can plausibly be attributed to internal developments. The fact that the two sibilants had seemingly merged completely is apparent in at least one inscription (Ry 507), where the forms $ms'nd$ and ms^3nd co-occur. As discussed in the respective section, the merger of different sibilants can be seen both elsewhere in Semitic, and the merger of s' and s^3 specifically is posited for both Proto-Arabic and proto-Ethio-Semitic, where this sound change is thought to have occurred through internal development.

Although an independent internal development cannot be precluded for the merger of s^1 and s^3 in late Sabaic, the fact that its earliest attestation occurs in the 4th century warrants additional attention (Sima 2001). As was previously discussed, the presence of the nasal article in South Arabia can similarly be dated to the 4th century AD at the latest, indicating speakers of Arabic must have been present in the region by that time at the latest. In this case, it is possible that this the sibilant merger arose because some Sabaic scribes spoke a form of Old Arabic or an Ethio-Semitic language as their native language.²⁵⁴

This situation is comparable to that of medieval Gəʿez, which was mostly authored by scribes who were native Amharic speakers. As at this stage Amharic had also merged the pronunciation of sibilants *sat* (s^1/s^3), and *śawt* (s^2) and it is not uncommon to find spellings of etymological s^2 with *sat* and s^1/s^3 with *śawt* (Leslau 1987:xiv; Weninger 2011c:83).

Secondly, starting from the Middle Sabaic period onwards, there is growing evidence for the full assimilation of nasals to a preceding consonant, resulting in spelling such as *bt* < *bnt*, “daughter” (3.1.2.). This appears to have been an areal phenomenon, as similar processes can be seen in certain North Arabian languages, such as Dadanitic (Kootstra 2019:48) as well as in Safaitic (Al-Jallad 2015a:51).²⁵⁵ The same merger is attested in some places in the Quran as well, whence it entered into Classical Arabic, for example *ʿammā* < *ʿan-mā*, “about”.

Consequently, certain Arabian onomastics attested in the Middle and Late Sabaic inscriptions exhibit the full assimilation of the nasal to a following consonant, including both Arabic and South Arabian names. Examples include toponyms such as *al-Mandab*, represented as *Mdbn*; personal names such as *Yankuf* and *al-Munḍir*, represented as *Ykf* and *Mḍrn*, respectively; and tribal names such as *Kinda*, represented as *Kdt*.

The Arabic tradition transmits these names with the nasal intact. Although this may not be surprising for names such as *al-Munḍir* and *Kinda*, which are likely of Arabic origins, it is more remarkable in the case of *Yankuf*, which was a markedly South Arabian name. The presence of the name *Yankuf* in the Arabic tradition indicates that it must have been borrowed into Arabic before the full assimilation of the nasal to a following consonant had been completed.

²⁵⁴ A similar phenomenon is attested in the early Sabaic inscriptions from Ethiopia, where etymological /t/ is frequently spelled with /s¹/, suggesting that the language of these inscriptions’ authors was an early Ethio-Semitic language, which had already undergone the change */t/ > */s¹/.

²⁵⁵ In fact, nasal assimilation can be seen as far north as the Levant, as the assimilation in the *niphil* forms in Northwest Semitic shows (Gzella 2011b:443)

4.4.2. Morphological arguments

Certain morphological features may indicate that some form of bilingualism may have been present in South Arabia during the final centuries of the pre-Islamic period:

The first piece of evidence consists of the representation of Arabic names in the Sabaic inscriptions. Multiple Sabaic inscriptions refer to tribal or personal names, containing the definite article *al-*.²⁵⁶ The earliest of these is the southern Sabaic inscription 'Abadān 1, which refers to the tribe 'Abd al-Qays as 'bdqys'n, in which the Arabic definite article *al-* is represented with the Sabaic definite article *-n*. This inscription was written in the year 470 of the Himyaritic calendar, meaning that as early as the year 360 AD, certain Sabaic scribes were competent enough in Arabic to translate the prefixed definite article with the corresponding suffixed definite article of Sabaic.

Further examples of the same phenomenon are the representation of the Arabic name al-Mundīr in two Late Sabaic inscriptions (CIH 541; Murayghān 3) as *Mḍrn*, as well as the spelling *Mdbn* in reference to the Mandab strait.²⁵⁷ The fact that the scribes of these inscriptions were able to give the equivalent of the Arabic prefixed definite article in Sabaic, namely the suffixed article *-n* shows that they had a competence in at least both languages.

The opposite phenomenon, namely the translation of the Sabaic suffixed definite article *-n* with the pro-nominal Classical Arabic definite article *al-* also exists. Medieval scholars transmitting the pre-Islamic Ḥimyarite month names consistently represent the South Arabian suffixed article *-n* with the prefixed definite article in Arabic.²⁵⁸ Examples include *Dū l-Mubakkir* from *ḍ-Mbkrn*, *Dū l-Ṣurāb* from *ḍ-Ṣrbn*, and *Dū l-Ḥirāf* from *ḍ-Ḥrfn*.^{259, 260}

A careful analysis of the onomastic evidence further points at morphological translation: similar to the names of the months, the Arabic medieval tradition refers to tribal and/or place names also attested in the pre-Islamic epigraphic corpora. A basic statistical analysis of 253 toponyms found in both the pre-Islamic inscriptions and in al-Hamdānī's *Ṣifat ḡazīrat al-ʿarab* and Yāqūt al-Rūmī's *Muḡam al-buldān* indicates the following:

²⁵⁶ The opposite, i.e., the fact that medieval Muslim scholars were aware that the suffix *-n* corresponded to the Arabic definite article *al-* was already pointed out by Beeston (Beeston 1984:29)

²⁵⁷ Ja 1028:4: *w-tṣn' s's'lt'n Mdbn*, 'he reinforced Mandab chain;' Ry 507: *w-yṣn'n s's'lt Mdbn*, id.; Ry 508:8: *w-l-ṣn'n s's'lt Mdbn*, 'to reinforce the chain of Mandab'.

²⁵⁸ This was already pointed out by Beeston (1984:29).

²⁵⁹ However, a new analysis of the medieval transmission of the Ḥimyarite month names from a historical-linguistic point of view and incorporating the manuscript evidence is overdue. There are certain idiosyncrasies between the 'Himyaritic' and Arabic forms (e.g., *d-qyzn* transmitted as both *dū l-qiyāz* and *dū-qayd*, the inconsistent definite article (both in 'Himyaritic' and Arabic) in *ḍ-ḥrf[n]* < *dū l-ḥirāf*; *dū-ḥarāf* (Robin 1998:125)

²⁶⁰ For a full list of the Ḥimyarite month names see Saliba (1985) and Robin (1998:124–25).

- a. The vast majority of toponyms (156 of 253) are attested as standing in the absolute or unmarked state in Sabaic, such as *Brḥ*. These toponyms are which are generally unmarked in the Arabic text as well, consequently *Bāriḥ*. A factor that complicates the analysis of these toponyms is the fact that, although Arabic formally distinguishes between indefinite nouns marked with nunation (triptotes) and unmarked indefinite nouns (diptotes) (see also the discussion in 2.5.2). However, few written Arabic texts and editions explicitly show this, meaning that it is difficult to determine whether the noun is diptotic or triptotic.
- b. A smaller number of toponyms (40 of 253) found in the inscriptions are marked with the Sabaic indefinite (i.e., *mimation*). Most of these toponyms are also indefinite in the Arabic texts. Examples include *Ḥbs²m* > *Ḥabša*, *Ḥmrm* > *Ḥamr*, *S'lḥm* > *Salīḥ*.
- c. Finally, of the 57 toponyms attested in the Sabaic inscriptions that are marked with the suffixed definite article *-n*, 47 are marked with the definite article *al-* in Arabic. Examples include *ʿšmn* > *al-ʿAšim*; *Dnbtn* > *al-Danabāt*; *Mqldn* > *al-Maqīlīd*.

	Arabic definite	Arabic indefinite
Sabaic definite	47/57 (82.4%)	10/57 (17.6%)
Sabaic indefinite	11/40 (27.5%)	29/40 (63.5%)
Sabaic absolute	23/156 (14.7%)	133/156 (85.3%)

The overlap of (in)definiteness in the Sabaic and Arabic forms of the South Arabian toponyms indicates that speakers of Arabic were generally able to recognize the Sabaic definite article and give the corresponding form of the article in Arabic. This kind of morphological adaptation tends to require at least some degree of bilingual competence (Sandnes 2016:7–8).

Thirdly, the medieval Arabic tradition preserves a number of South Arabian personal names that are based on an imperfect verbal phrase (e.g., *Yh²mn*, “he is protected”). Whereas such verbal phrasal names are common throughout West Semitic, they tend to be relatively rare in Arabic (Weninger 2002:220). Although verbal names are attested in Arabic, they are either derived from Hebrew and/or Aramaic or reflect archaisms (Jeffery 2007:290–91).

Some of these South Arabian names are vocalized on the pattern *yuf²il*, corresponding to the Classical Arabic IVth or causative stem. Semantically, this form corresponds to the Sabaic causative, marked by a prefix *h-*. Some salient examples include the names of the pre-Islamic Himyarite rulers *S²mr Yhr²s²* and *Ys¹r Yhn²m*, which are transmitted in the Arabic script as *s²mr yr²s* and *y²sr yy²m*, respectively (Gajda 2009:195).

The correspondence between the Sabaic causative *h-* and the Arabic causative *ʔ-* appears to have been known to the 10th century scholar al-Hamdānī (Robin 2021:99–100). In the second volume of his *al-Iklīl*, he states that the origin of the name *Hašwa²* is *ʔAšwa²* but notes that “the Himyarites replace the *hā²* with the *hamza*” (*wa-l-ašlu ʔašwa² ʔilla ʔana ḥimyara tabdulu l-hā² min al-hamza*”).

In light of al-Hamdānī's statement, it seems that the South Arabian causative-based names in the medieval tradition genuinely underwent a process of morphological translation: the function of the *h*-causative was understood and translated with its equivalent form in Arabic. A further example is the name *Yur^ʿiš*. This name is attested as *Yhr^ʿs²* in the South Arabian epigraphic record, predominantly in Sabaic, but also in two Qatabanic and one Ḥadramitic inscription. Importantly, the form *Yr^ʿs²* is attested only once in a Middle Sabaic inscription dating to the reign of *Šammar Yuhar^ʿiš*. Whether this is a simple scribal error or (more excitingly) possible evidence of substrate influence is unclear. However, it is evident that the form *Yr^ʿs²* is functionally unattested. This, in turn, indicates that the Arabic causative form *Yur^ʿiš* genuinely represents a semantic translation of the Sabaic form *Yhr^ʿs²*.²⁶¹

Nevertheless, awareness of the correspondence between the Sabaic and Arabic causatives appears to have been lost very quickly. A comparable situation can be found in the Quranic imperative *hātū*, which also represents a retention of the *h*-causative, derived from an Old Arabic form *hatā* (cf. Classical Arabic *ʾatā*). The same sound laws that led to the imposition of the glottal stop in similar verbs did not affect the form *hātū*, indicating that this form was no longer analyzable as derived from the root *ʾatā* (Van Putten 2022:179).

Further complicating the transmission of such names is the fact that in the Arabic script, the difference between the G-stem (I) and the C-stem (IV) in the imperfect is only explicitly marked through the use of the vowel signs (*harakat*). Outside the Quranic texts, the usage of vowel signs is rare, both in contemporary and historical documents. In this regard, the many variations of the South Arabian etymologically causative personal names encountered in the Islamic tradition is to be expected, particularly as these names had not been linguistically analyzable for centuries.

4.4.3. Superstrate, adstrate and substrate

In contact linguistics, the terms super- and substrate are used to refer to language varieties considered to have relatively more or less power or prestige, respectively.²⁶² Furthermore, the term adstrate is used to refer to situations of language contact wherein neither language enjoys more or less prestige than the other.

²⁶¹ More examples of original *h*-causative South Arabian personal names occur in the medieval tradition. Al-Hamdānī (Iklīl 10:115) transmits the name Yumğad. The former goes back to a personal name *Yhmğd*, attested both in Qatabanic (Baba al-Ḥadd 2/CSAI II:2) and Sabaic (MAFRAY-ḏi-Ḥadīd 1:2 and 2:3, YMN 14, both as *Yhmğd* and, starting from the Middle period onwards as *Ymğd*. This name is more common in South Sabaic and Late Sabaic, possibly indicating a shift from *h* > \emptyset (**yuhaf^ʿil* > *yuf^ʿil*) in that particular region. The latter is attested as the epithet of the deity Taʿlab.

²⁶² For example, (Old) French functioned as a superstrate in England following the Norman conquest of 1066; its influence can be determined by the fact that English terms related to meat are derived from French, whereas terms referring to the animal itself are derived from a Germanic root: e.g., *beef* (Fr. *boeuf*) vs *cow* (compare Ger. *Kuh*).

Based on the linguistic evidence presented above, the linguistic situation in South Arabia was characterized by both superstrate and substrate as well as adstrate contact. Furthermore, there is evidence that between the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods the superstrate and substrate languages of the region reversed roles.

As a result of the socio-political changes discussed in the first chapter, the role of these languages shifted. Although Sabaic had been South Arabia’s prestige language up until and throughout the Himyarite and Aksumite periods, the political upheavals of the 6th century had likely severely damaged its reputation. Abraha’s usage of Late Sabaic in his inscriptions until the apparent collapse of his dynasty represents the final stages of the language in its traditional position as a prestige language. The near-total disappearance of South Arabian writing was therefore less the result of a sudden language shift, but rather the social decay of Sabaic and general processes of decentralization coinciding with this period.

However, as previously discussed, the situation in South Arabia was not just characterized by contact between Sabaic and varieties of Arabic. The presence of certain features that can only be attributed to an Ethio-Semitic language implies that such a language was also spoken in South Arabia before the 6th century AD.

Table 26: Linguistic strata in South Arabia between 560 and c. 800 AD

	Superstrate	Adstrate	Substrate
Pre-560 AD	Late Sabaic		Old Arabic Ethio-Semitic
560 – 800 AD	–	Spoken Late Sabaic Old Arabic varieties Ethio-Semitic	–
Post-800 AD	Classical Arabic		Non-Classical Arabic Late Sabaic Ethio-Semitic

The integration of South Arabia into the Islamic polity intensified the process of Arabization, which happened in different waves. During this time, other dialects of Arabic came to be spoken in South Arabia, including those that were characterized by the lateral article *al-* (and its allomorphs). The contemporary dialects spoken in Yemen suggest that speakers of such dialects may have come into contact with speakers of a South Arabian language, as the presence of the 1st and 2nd person masculine pronominal suffix *-k(V)* indicates.

A notable exception to this rule is the dialectal situation around the city of Ṣaʿda. The high degree of linguistic variation and its idiosyncrasies found in this region can possibly be attributed to Ṣaʿda’s importance as a political and religious center from the 9th century, following the arrival of the Zaydī imam Al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq in 279/893. Considering Ṣaʿda’s strategic location between Nağrān and the central Yemeni highlands, it is not surprising that this region saw more intensive contact between speakers of Arabic and speakers of a late form of a pre-Islamic South Arabian language.

4.5. Scripts and writing in late antique South Arabia

After the collapse of Abraha's dynasty the South Arabian script fell out of political use. Although some inscriptions from the very end of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods are extant (see also 4.3), its political applications disappeared with the end of South Arabian political independence.

The South Arabian script fell out of use without major observable political change. Unlike the final Ugaritic inscriptions, which were written during the 'Bronze Age collapse', giving testament to Ugarit's impending destruction, the youngest dated monumental inscription seems almost banal in nature. This inscription (CIH 325), which dates to 669 of the Ḥimyarite calendar (559 AD) mentions the restoration of a dam. Carved in a clearly legible ductus and written in Late Sabaic, there is nothing about the text that suggests it would be the last monumental inscription. Although it cannot be excluded that even later monumental South Arabian inscriptions were written, so far none have been discovered.

The political instabilities and near-constant state of warfare that characterized South Arabia during the 6th century AD seem to have had little impact on the monumental tradition, at least initially. As previously discussed, the Aksumites continued the political-cultural traditions established by the Ḥimyarites centuries before, with new inscriptions written in South Arabia throughout the period of Aksumite occupation. Abraha, too, presented himself as a Ḥimyarite ruler (1.4.2; 1.5.1.). The little documentary evidence that exists indicates a degree of political continuity between the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. Many of the same tribal groups that had wielded political influence in the 6th century would re-emerge in the early 9th century (1.4.4; 1.5.2).

Considering the available evidence, the abandonment of the monumental tradition is all the more curious. It is not impossible that various ills of the sixth century disproportionately affected the scribal class. Stein (2005) suggests that there is no evidence for widespread literacy in South Arabia, and that texts were predominantly composed by a professional scribal class. Important indications of this are the attestations of so-called 'practice texts', with which scribes exercised their writing skills and the fact that personal letters refer to senders in the third, rather than the first person (Stein 2009a:270–71).

Abraha's dam inscription (CIH 541) refers to an outbreak of a disease (*dllm*), which Robin identifies with the Justinian plague (Robin 1992a:234). The Justinian Plague was an early outbreak of *yersinia pestis*,²⁶³ which is estimated to have resulted in a mortality rate ranging from between 10 to 40% in Constantinople alone (Rosen 2008:209–10). If the 'disease' mentioned in Abraha's inscription was indeed *y. pestis*, it may have had a devastating effect on South Arabia's settled population.

A recent theory seeks to explain the rise of Islam within the context of climate change on the Arabian Peninsula. Hydrologic analysis conducted on stalagmites in western and northern Oman shows a dramatic and sudden decrease of rainfall

²⁶³ The most (in)famous outbreak of *y. pestis* was the 'Black Death,' which would wreak havoc throughout Europe and the Middle East during the 13th and 14th centuries AD.

beginning at the end of the 5th century AD, with droughts peaking between 500 and 530 AD (Fleitmann et al. 2022:2). Persistent droughts and the resulting decrease of agricultural output could similarly have disproportionately affected the Himyarites' scribal class.

The most likely explanation is that the aforementioned factors reinforced each other. Rather than imagining an apocalyptic scenario involving a massive number of casualties, either from invasions, starvation, and/or disease, it seems more likely that the tradition of writing monumental inscription was gradually abandoned. The different social problems that plagued South Arabia during the 6th century simply exerted so much stress on the Himyarite political tradition that it lost its legitimacy and that few people had the social and financial capacity to have new monumental inscriptions made.

4.5.1. The South Arabian script in early Islamic South Arabia

Despite the cessation of the South Arabian monumental tradition, South Arabian inscriptions continued to be written throughout the final stages of the pre-Islamic into the early Islamic periods. A previous section (4.3.2.) discussed how several inscriptions from the Islamic South Arabia were written using the South Arabian script. Although these inscriptions are difficult to date both due to their brevity as well as a lack of broader context, they still provide an invaluable insight into the social environment in South Arabia after the end of the Himyarite period.

Although these inscriptions are occasionally described as 'bilingual', these texts rarely consist of more than the authors' personal name(s) and/or patronymic. Knowledge of South Arabian orthographic norms appears to have fluctuated significantly. For example, the Ṭawq b. al-Hayṭam inscription (figure 7) does not contain word dividers, while the ductus is much less consistent than those of the pre-Islamic inscriptions. Furthermore, unlike the Arabic names that were represented with the corresponding Sabaic suffixed definite article (see above, 4.2.1.), this inscription simply copied the Arabic form. In essence, this is an Arabic inscription in South Arabian letters.

In this regard, the two inscriptions from Ġabal Umm Layla seem to be much closer to the (Late) Sabaic orthographic tradition (see figure 5 and 6, above). Here, the authors were mostly capable of writing the South Arabian glyphs in a consistent manner, while also correctly applying word dividers. Still, the inscriptions' language as well as the authors' names clearly indicate that the inscription was written during the early Islamic period.

Similar inscriptions have been discovered more recently: on September 18, 2021, a photograph of a 'bi-graphic' inscription was posted on the social media platform Twitter.²⁶⁴ The paleographic features of the inscription suggest a 1st/7th century date.²⁶⁵ The inscription itself is divided into two parts, which read as follows:

²⁶⁴ This photograph was made and uploaded by the Saudi-based Twitter user @mashalgrad (<https://twitter.com/mashalgrad/status/1438971533075140608>).

²⁶⁵ Van Putten (personal communication)

Ahmad b. Abdallah 1 (Arabic script):

rb ʔgfr l-ʔhmd ʔbn ʕbdlh
rabb iġfir li-aḥmad bin ʕabdallah
“O Lord, forgive Aḥmad, son of Abdallah

Ahmad b. Abdallah 2 (South Arabian script):

ḏnbh yrb
ḏanba-hū yā rabb
“His sins, o Lord.”

The Ahmad b. Abdallah inscription represents an interesting combination of both early Arabic orthographic and late Sabaic orthographic practices. For example, the *nūn* in the word *ibn*, “son”, has a particular slant characteristic of the 1st/7th century Arabic script. However, the author also placed a word divider between the words *ḏnbh* and *yā*, written in South Arabian glyphs.

Finally, the historical significance of the Ġabal Dabūb should also be discussed. It differs in several places from the South Arabian-Arabic ‘bi-graphic’ texts discussed so far. Most notably, the Ġabal Dabūb inscription is a brief, yet complete text, rather than simply a transposition of the authors’ names into the South Arabian script.

The discussion of the inscription’s language has thus far not devoted much attention to its orthography. Al-Ḥāḡḡ and Faqʕas’ decision to read the text as Sabaic is reasonable when considering the fact that paleographically, the inscription is nearly indistinguishable from other miniscule texts from the Late Sabaic period.²⁶⁶ For example, the both the ductus and the following of orthographic norms show that the author was keenly aware of how the miniscule script was supposed to be written.

However, as Al-Jallad notes (2022:14), the Ġabal Dabūb inscription consistently spells the third person masculine pronominal ending as *-h*. This is a notable difference from Sabaic writing practices, in which this pronominal ending is represented as *-hw*. The same phenomenon can be seen in the Ahmad b. Abdallah inscription, where the form **ḏanba-hū* is spelled *ḏnb-h*, rather than a hypothetical expected Sabaic *ḏnb-hw*.

In other words, despite the lingering awareness and application of the South Arabian script in the early Islamic period, thus far there is no evidence of Sabaic being produced during the same time. Furthermore, as time progressed, the orthographic practices of the Late Sabaic writing tradition was also lost. Whereas the earliest inscriptions indicate a relatively intimate familiarity with its rules, by the time of that the Ṭawq b. al-Hayṭam inscription was written, there is no evidence for the usage of word dividers, consistently applied in earlier inscriptions.

²⁶⁶ The only exception appears to be the unusual shape of the letter *z* (al-Ḥāḡḡ and Faqʕas 2018:20).

4.5.2. The South Arabian script in medieval Islamic scholarship

Apart from the epigraphic material, there are some medieval works that show knowledge of both the South Arabian script and an at least partial understanding of inscriptions' content was retained into the Islamic period. A recent publication by Robin focuses extensively on the inscriptions transmitted by the South Arabian scholar al-Hamdānī as well as his contemporaries (Robin 2021).

Apart from this, the scholar and bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm, who lived in Iraq during the second half of the 10th century was able to give a reasonably accurate representation of the South Arabian script. Ibn al-Nadīm's main scholarly contribution was his *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, which, according to the author was intended to be a compendium of “all books of the Arabs (*al-ʿarab*) and non-Arabs (*ʿaḡam*)”. Ibn al-Nadīm briefly discusses the South Arabian script, which he calls Ḥimyarī (see also 5.5), in the first chapter of this book. He states (Ibn al-Nadīm 1964:9).²⁶⁷

“A confidant claims that he heard some of the elders of al-Yaman say that the Ḥimyarites used to write in the *musnad*, separating the *ʿalif*, the *bāʿ*, and the *tāʿ*. I have seen a passage in the library of Maʿmūn, which I translated as: “what the Commander of the Faithful ʿAbdullāh al-Maʿmūn, may God honor him, ordered the translators to copy”. All of it was written in the Ḥimyarite script, and I give an example of it, based on what was in the text.”²⁶⁸

Ibn al-Nadīm then provides a copy of the South Arabian script, giving the South Arabian glyphs with their corresponding Arabic forms in the margins. Although it is apparent that in the centuries following the collapse of the Ḥimyarite state some variations had crept into the script, most of the South Arabian letters correspond fairly well to those found in the inscriptions.

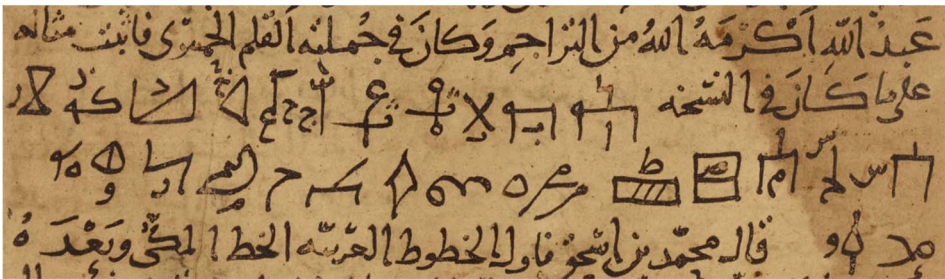


Figure 9: The ‘Ḥimyaritic script’ (*al-qalam al-ḥimyarī*) in a manuscript of Ibn al-Nadīm’s *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, held at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

²⁶⁷ Following the translation of Dodge (Ibn al-Nadīm and Dodge 1970:9–10)

²⁶⁸ *zaʿama l-tiqatu ʿanna-hū samiʿa mašāyihā min ʿahli l-yamani yaqūlūna ʿinna ḥimyarā kānat taktubu bi-l-musnadin ʿalā ḥilāfi ʿiškāli ʿalifa wa-bāʿa wa-tāʿa wa-raʿaytu ʿanna ḡuzʿan min ḥizānati l-maʿmūna tarḡamat-hu mā ʿamara bi-nashī-hī ʿamīru l-muʿminīna ʿabdullāhi l-maʿmūnu ʿakrama-hū llaḥu mina l-tarāḡimi wa-kāna fī ḡumlati-hī l-qalama l-ḥimyarīyya fa-ʿaṭabat miṭālu-hū ʿalā mā kāna fī l-nuṣṣa.*

Ibn al-Nadīm seems to also have had a basic familiarity with the orthographic practices and historical context of the South Arabian script. For example, he states that the “Himyarites wrote in the *musnad*” and that there was a “separation of the letters *ʿalif*, *bāʿ* and *tāʿ*” (*ʿalā ḥilāf iškāl ʿalif wa-bāʿ wa-tāʿ*).

A similar treatise regarding the South Arabian script appears in al-Hamdānī’s *Kitāb al-Iklīl*, volume 8. Three manuscripts, one of which dates to the 11th/17th century (Glaser 138), the other two to the 13th/19th century (Leiden Or 6357 and BnF Arabe 6056, respectively) can be used to compare al-Hamdānī’s representation of the script to that of Ibn al-Nadīm.

About the South Arabian script, al-Hamdānī notes the following:

“This is the Himyaritic writing and an example of it, regarding the letters *ʿalif*, *bāʿ*, *tā*, *ṭāʿ*, and so forth.

al-Hamdānī said: ‘Most of the disagreements among the [learned] folk regarding the Himyaritic inscriptions is the result of the letters’ different shapes, because there are four per letter, or even five. So, someone who would read [them] would not know more than a single shape. And if a mistake would occur in this place, we saw it fit to add the shapes of all letters, i.e., *ʿalif*, *bāʿ*, *tā*, *ṭāʿ*, underneath them. The differences in these shapes are like those of the Arabic script.’”

Al-Hamdānī goes on to state the following:

“They elided the *ʿalif*, if it occurred in the middle of the letter, such as in *Hamdān* and *Riyyām*, which they wrote as *hamdan* and *riyyam*. The copyists of [Quranic] manuscripts followed [this practice] in writing words such as *al-raḥman*, as well as the *ʿalif* of *insān*.”

Here al-Hamdānī refers to the lack of *matres lectionis* in the South Arabian inscriptions. It is noteworthy that he only refers to the *ʿalif*. If he was aware that *matres lectionis* were not used in non-final position at all, he does not refer to it. Al-Hamdānī’s reference to similar practices in Quranic manuscripts is interesting. To this day, there are some Arabic words pronounced with a long *ā* that is not reflected in writing, but which, in careful writing, can be represented with the so-called dagger alif (*ʿalif ḥanḡariyya*).²⁶⁹

“They would also add a *ḍamma* at the end of a word, as well as a *waw*, [such as] *alayhimū*. With regards to the pronunciation, [it is] as how the people of Mecca and those like them would read it, except that it would to be written. That is why you see them recite ‘*alayhimū wa-lā-ḍālīna*’²⁷⁰.”

In this place, al-Hamdānī is talking about the spelling of the masculine third person plural clitic pronoun. In Sabaic orthography, both the third personal singular

²⁶⁹ The most common examples of the omission of the *alif* to represent the long *ā* are *allāh* (الله), *ilāh* (إله), *hādā* (هَدَا), *hādīhi* (هَدَى) *dālīka* (ذَلِكَ) and *lākinna* (لَكِنَّ).

²⁷⁰ This being a partial citation of the final verse of the *fātiḥa*, (Q1:6: *ṣirāṭa ʿallaḍīna ʿanʿamta ʿalayhim ḡayri l-maḡḍūbi ʿalayhim wa-lā l-ḍālīna*).

and plural clitic pronouns were spelled with an additional *-w*, in essence *-hw* and *-hmw* respectively. Al-Hamdānī compares this to a particular Qurʾanic reading (*qirāʾa*, pl. *qirāʾāt*), particularly in Mecca. In fact, Ibn Kaṭīr al-Makkī (d. 120/738) who, as his name implies, was a Meccan native, did indeed read *ʿalayhum* and *ʿalayhim* as *alayhumū* and *alayhimū*, respectively (Nasser 2013:129, 2020:192).

Finally, al-Hamdānī was also aware of the usage of word dividers. He notes the following:

“And they separate each two lines with a line and separate every two words on a line with a vertical [lit. “standing”] line”.

wa-yafruzūna kulla saṭrayni bi-ḥaṭṭin wa-yufaṣilūna bayna kulli kalimatin wa-kalimatin fi-l-saṭri bi-ḥaṭṭin qāʾimin

The copy of a South Arabian inscription in al-Hamdānī’s *Iklīl VIII* shows what he means: firstly, the horizontal line between the two rows of the inscription is visible. Secondly, the word dividers between the words can also be seen. Interestingly, the scribe that copied this text may not have been aware of their function, as the word divider appears to have been merged with the letter *r* (figure 10). It is possible that he either did not recognize its function as a word divider and thought it a part of the letter.

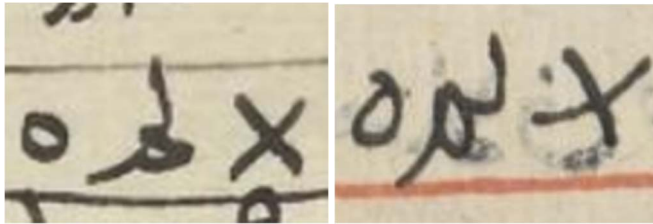


Figure 10: The merging of the South Arabian glyph *r* with the word divider in Leiden Or 6357 and Glaser 138

Furthermore, the relative degradation of the script’s representation can also be seen in the differences between the Glaser manuscript on the one hand and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and Leiden manuscripts on the other. A case in point is the representation of the South Arabian glyph *n*. In the Glaser manuscript, the South Arabian equivalent is maintained fairly well, the diagonal stroke having been somewhat maintained. In the BnF a slight bend occurs, whereas in the Leiden manuscript there is only a horizontal stroke:

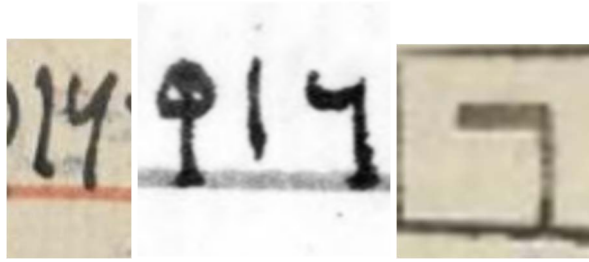


Figure 11: Representation of the South Arabian glyph *n* in different (early) modern manuscripts of al-Iklīl 8.

At the end of his description of the South Arabian script, al-Hamdānī gives an example of an actual South Arabian inscription, providing both the original text and its corresponding values in the Arabic script. According to al-Hamdānī's transcription, the inscription reads: *ʿawsala rafṣān wa-banay-hamū haqniya ʿattar yaṭāʿ wa-yarīm*”:

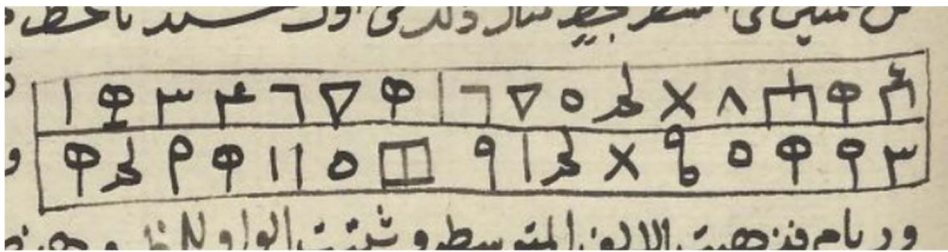


Figure 12: Al-Hamdānī's copy of a South Arabian inscription (Leiden Or. 6357, p. 28).

The name *ʿaws/lt Rfs²n* in fact does appear in the South Arabian epigraphic corpus, there being at least four attestations of the name in a dedicatory context.²⁷¹ Moreover, the Central Middle Sabaic inscription Ir 4 (probably 2nd–3rd century AD) contains phrasing very similar to the inscription al-Hamdānī gives us (translation adapted from CSAI):

Ir 4 (Central Middle Sabaic):

ʿaws¹lt Rfs²n w-yrṃ ʿymn w-bny-hw Ḥywwᵀtr Ydᵀ bnw Hmdn ʿqwl s²b²n bn S¹m²y s²lᵀn d-Ḥs²dm hqnyw ʿlmqh Ṭḥwn b¹l [...]

ʿAws¹lt Rfs²n and Yrṃ ʿYmn and his sons Ḥywwᵀtr Ydᵀ, of the family Hamdān, qayls of the tribe S¹m²y, third of d-Ḥs²dm, dedicated to ʿĪlmuquh Ṭahwān, lord of (...)

There are several possible explanations as to why there are differences between the inscription given here and the inscription found in *al-Iklīl* VIII. It is possible that al-Hamdānī cited another, possibly unknown inscription, which explains why

²⁷¹ Inscriptions CIH 352, CIH 647, GI 1218 and Ir 4.

his reproduction has the dedication to ʿAṭṭar, rather than ʾIlmuquh. On the other hand, it seems reasonable that al-Hamdānī did not copy the inscription immediately, but rather remembered it as well as he could. This would explain why some words had disappeared. It also explains why several letters are missing in al-Hamdānī’s reproduction of the South Arabian inscription.²⁷²

Al-Hamdānī’s seems to have had more than just a superficial understanding of Sabaic. He was aware of the relation of the Sabaic *h*-causative to the Arabic causative (discussed in more detail above, 4.4.2) and he also seems to have been able to recognize the final *t* in the name Awsalat (ʾwslt) as a feminine marker. Although he does not explicitly mention this, the manuscripts show that this name is represented with a final *h*, rather than a *tāʾ*? (see also 2.5.1)

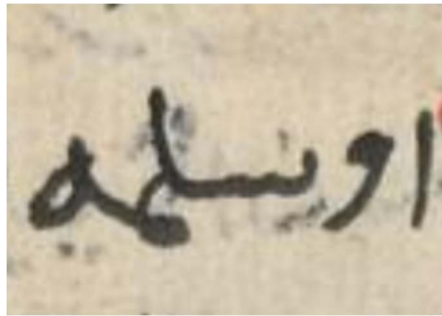


Figure 13: The South Arabian name ʾwslt represented as ʾAwsalah in Glaser 138

Furthermore, al-Hamdānī seems to have understood the function of *mimation* as the marker of the indeterminate (see also 2.2.4.4). In his *Kitāb al-Ġawharatayn*, which mostly focuses on geology and metallurgy, al-Hamdānī seeks to explain the etymology of the term *dirham*.

In the *Ġawharatayn*, al-Hamdānī presents a complex argument to explain as to why the term *dirham* is in fact Arabic.²⁷³ He begins by stating that the term was used by the ‘true Arabs’ (*ism al-dirham li-l-ʿarab al-ʿāriba*) and that it was specifically connected to Ḥimyar, as they were the first to use the dirham amongst the Arabs (*li-ʾanna-hum ʾawwal man ʾaḥḍaṭa ḍālika min al-ʿarab al-ʿāriba*). Al-Hamdānī goes on to state that the term *dirham* is based on the verb *daraha*, which has a nominal form *al-dirh*. Finally, he reaches the point of the argument and states that the Himyar “add a *mīm* to the noun” (*wa-ḥimyar tazīd fī l-ism mīm*) and gives the example of the toponym *Talfum*.

²⁷² For example, according to al-Hamdānī’s transcription, the second line starts with the verb *haqniya*, “to dedicate to;” a closer inspection of the manuscript evidence shows a *h* followed by *q* and a *w* with the *n* having disappeared somewhere in between. Al-Hamdānī accurately reproduces the South Arabian verb in transcription, showing that he probably did see the inscription, but forgot to add the *n*.

²⁷³ The term *dirham* is of course borrowed from Greek *drachma* (Beekes and Beek 2016:352)

Although he makes point in an admittedly convoluted matter, al-Hamdānī does seem to have understood the basic function of *mimation*. He goes on to explain that the addition of the *mīm* is in fact “pure Arabic” (*al-ʿarabīyya al-mahḏa*) and compares it to the assimilation of indefinite Arabic nunation to a following *mīm*, as in the Quran (2:26): *ʾinna llāhu lā yastahyī ʾan yaḏriba mataḷa mmā baʿūdatan*, “indeed God is not ashamed to give the example of even a mosquito”. In other words, al-Hamdānī implies that mimation spread as a kind of re-analysis of nunation. The socio-historical implications of this passage will be discussed again (see 5.5).

Al-Hamdānī’s and Ibn al-Nadīm’s descriptions of the South Arabian script indicate the following:

Firstly, the terminology indicates a relatively straightforward transmission between Late Sabaic and Arabic. The most common terms to refer to South Arabian writing in the Islamic tradition, *musnad* and *zabūr* seem to be directly derived from the Late Sabaic forms *msʿnd* (< *ms³nd*) and *zbr/dbr* (Maraqten 1998:300–301).

Secondly, some knowledge of how to read and interpret the South Arabian script survived into the 4th/10th century AD. An awareness of the orthographic practices of the South Arabian writing school was also retained: both al-Hamdānī and Ibn al-Nadīm note that the letters were unconnected and al-Hamdānī specifically refers to the usage of word dividers. Furthermore, Al-Hamdānī notes that the same letter could be written in different shapes, which can be interpreted as an allusion to the historical development of the South Arabian script, the difference between the monumental and miniscule scripts, or both.

Finally, al-Hamdānī’s example and translation of a South Arabian inscription, which appears to be genuine, clearly shows that he was able to correctly identify the South Arabian glyphs and their corresponding counterparts in the Arabic script. The fact that he was able to translate this inscription also seems to indicate that his knowledge of Sabaic may have been more than superficial.

However, much like the citations of pre-Islamic poetry attributed to Ḥimyarite kings, so could the citation of pre-Islamic inscriptions play a role in determining lines of genealogy. For al-Hamdānī, knowledge of the South Arabian script was as much a matter of scholarly interest as a tool to be used in political discussions. Although the circumstances are only known from his own works, al-Hamdānī’s engagement in the political discussions Ṣaʿda under the Yuʿfirids (Löfgren 2012). Any interpretation of medieval citations of pre-Islamic inscriptions should be done with caution. The citation of South Arabian inscriptions in medieval Islamic scholarship will be further discussed in the following chapter.

4.6. Discussion

This chapter examined the social and historical context in which the transfer of linguistic features, discussed in chapter 3, occurred in South Arabia.

Firstly, the type of features that transferred between the languages of South Arabia indicate an intense degree of contact. As mentioned before, there are essentially no restrictions on which features can be transferred between languages, albeit certain features tend to be more resistant to borrowing than others. In the case of South Arabia, there is evidence of relatively borrowing-resistant features transferring between languages. A good example of this is the borrowing of prepositions, the internal plural form *ʔaCCūC* and verbal morphology, exemplified by the 1st and 2nd person suffix conjugation.

Secondly, a careful examination of their linguistic features shows that some of the varieties of Arabic spoken in South Arabia today must have spread to South Arabia in the pre-Islamic period. The presence of Old Arabic morphological features retained in these Arabic dialects attests to this. For example, the nasal definite article *an-* (and its allomorphs) represents a feature that was replaced with the lateral article *al-* throughout most Arabic dialects, but several relatively remote Arabic dialects of South Arabia were unaffected by this change. The presence of the internal or apophonic passive in many South Arabian dialects is another example of a feature that was lost in most other Arabic vernacular yet continues to be used in South Arabia.

Determining at which point the process of Arabization began is not straightforward. The presence of the nasal definite article shows it had started no later than the 4th century AD, although the Amiric inscriptions (if they can be taken as Arabic), would suggest the earliest presence of Arabic speakers may go back as far as the 2nd century BC, if not earlier. Although direct linguistic evidence for Arabic speakers disappears in the 2nd century AD, lexical material from the Middle and Late Sabaic inscriptions suggest a continued presence in the South Arabian western and southern coastal plains.

The presence of certain morphological and syntactic features present in (Late) Sabaic also point towards a pre-Islamic migration to South Arabia. During this period, Late Sabaic was still maintained as prestige language in the region, and it is likely during this period that certain morphological and syntactical features, which tend to be relatively more resistant to borrowing spread into local, pre-Islamic varieties of Arabic spoken in the region.

However, the picture remains complex. For example, many of the contemporary Arabic dialects of Yemen that have the characteristic ‘South Arabian’ *k*-based suffix conjugation also have the typically ‘North Arabian’ article with *al-*. The presence of the lateral article would suggest that these dialects would have entered South Arabia in the early Islamic period. However, at this point Late Sabaic had likely lost its status as a prestige language, which in turn complicates the notion that its verbal morphology would have spread into these relatively younger dialects.

Furthermore, the linguistic evidence discussed in this chapter also indicates that during the final centuries of the pre-Islamic period, Himyarite society was at

least partially bilingual. The fact that the Himyarite scribes of the 5th and 6th century recognized typically Old Arabic morphological features, such as the definite article, and were able to represent these with the corresponding Late Sabaic forms is evidence of this. Adding to this is the notion that some of the Himyarite scribal class spoke Arabic as their first language, which is a possible explanation for the coalescence of the sibilants *s'* and *s*³.

Furthermore, some understanding of Late Sabaic survived, albeit imperfectly, at least until the 10th century. The South Arabian scholar al-Hamdānī seems to have been aware of the morphological purpose of the Sabaic causative *h*- and the grammatical function of mimation. It is worth noting that he approached these phenomena from the perspective of an Islamic scholar and sought to explain them in a way that they corresponded to the grammar of Classical Arabic. As such, a philological tradition devoted to the study of Sabaic (and the other South Arabian languages) on their own terms never developed.

By comparison, the South Arabian script itself was retained in South Arabia for at least several centuries after the end of the monumental writing tradition. During the late pre-Islamic and into the early Islamic period, South Arabian orthographic practices were retained fairly well, as the Ḡabal Dabūb inscription shows. While the South Arabian script itself remained in use, it was only occasionally used to write personal names, or short phrases. In the case of the latter, the language of such inscriptions was Arabic. In this regard it is interesting that so far, no inscriptions containing particularly 'Himyaritic' features have been discovered.

The fact that local South Arabians continued to use the South Arabian script and the medieval Islamic scholars were interested in the pre-Islamic inscriptions raises the following questions. What motivated the inhabitants of South Arabia to carve their names and those of their ancestors next to inscriptions carved out centuries earlier? And similarly, if a philological tradition aimed at deciphering the inscriptions never developed, why did scholars like al-Hamdānī feel the need to cite them, be they genuine or fantastical.

The following chapter will address such questions by investigating the social context of the early Islamic period in South Arabia and looking at the role of language during this period.

CHAPTER 5: Linguistic and social change in early Islamic South Arabia

5.1. Introduction

The linguistic change described in the previous chapter took place during a period of significant socio-political upheaval. Linguistic change began while the Himyarite kings were still the hegemon over the entire region and continued throughout the Aksumite invasions and the collapse of central political authority. This process did not cease until well after the region's integration into the Islamic polity in the 9th century, and likely continued afterward as well.

When South Arabia became an integral part of the new socio-political system of Islam, its inhabitants had to both negotiate the identity they shared with their co-religionists, but also determine their identity as South Arabians. With the coming of Islam, Arabic, already at least partially present in South Arabia as a spoken language, also became the language of the chancellery and of high culture. South Arabia and its inhabitants had become part of a new socio-political system. South Arabians, in turn, had to define both their position within the ruling elite, and, furthermore, develop a distinct identity within this elite (Webb 2021:286–88).

By the time Muslim scholars began to make sense of what had happened in the preceding centuries, the world had changed dramatically. Muslim scholars were not just separated from South Arabia's pre-Islamic history in terms of time and language, they were also operating within a completely historiographic framework (Crone 2003:6–8). By the Abbasid period Muslim scholars had come to see all of Arabia as the “Island of the Arabs” (*ġazīrat al-‘arab*) whose inhabitants were all part of a single ethno-cultural unit: *al-‘arab*, “the Arabs” (Webb 2016:137). South Arabia, in particular, came to be cast as the original “homeland of the Arabs”. Retroactively, the early Islamic Arab tribes were divided into ‘northern’ and ‘southern’ branches.

Yet there is no evidence to suggest that the pre-Islamic South Arabians considered themselves as sharing a cultural or political identity with the communities of central and northern Arabia. Nevertheless, the medieval tradition considered South Arabia, now known as *al-Yaman*, as an inseparable and crucial part of the “Arab homeland”. South Arabia's pre-Islamic rulers, the ‘kings of Ḥimyar’, were framed as enlightened pre-Muhammadan monotheist kings, whose exploits saw them conquer vast swathes of the known world, ranging from the Atlantic Ocean to China, all the while composing poetry in perfect Classical Arabic and leaving inscriptions, also written in Arabic. At the same time, medieval Islamic scholars were aware of South Arabia's linguistic particularities and the significant ways in which their ‘Ḥimyaritic’ diverged from the linguistic standards of the Arabic *fushā*.

The final chapter of this dissertation describes how analyzing linguistic change, addressed in the previous chapters, can help contextualize this paradox.

It will first present an overview as to how the geographic definition of South Arabia changed during the late antique period. It does so by going through the Greek and Roman sources, the pre-Islamic epigraphy, and finally, early Islamic material. Specifically, it seeks to address the issue of whether South Arabia's inhabitants identified themselves as belonging to a greater 'Arabian' identity or not. In other words, it seeks to answer the question: when did South Arabia become a part of Arabia?

Secondly, it will discuss the presence of South Arabians in the early Islamic polity, by looking at epigraphic and documentary evidence. It will contextualize this evidence by investigating how South Arabians came to assert their identity during this period, particularly by presenting themselves as the inheritors of a grand pre-Islamic cultural legacy. This ties into a discussion about South Arabian influence on Islamic exegesis, which, over time, was to connect Quranic events, characters, and locations with South Arabia. It will argue that this process was neither self-evident nor uncontested, but the result of a conscious process and actively developed by exegetes of predominantly South Arabian origin.

Finally, the chapter discusses how early Muslim scholars addressed the paradox of South Arabia's linguistic character, by looking at the social context of the term 'Himyaritic' (*himyari/himyariyya*). It will be argued that medieval scholars did not just use the term 'Himyaritic' to describe specific linguistic phenomena, but also as a socio-linguistically to juxtapose what they considered 'correct' and 'incorrect' language.

5.2. Late antique South Arabia: cultural and geographic definitions

It is often taken for granted that throughout its history, South Arabia constituted a clearly defined geographic and cultural unit. For example, in *Ancient West Arabian*, Rabin (1951:25) states that "[t]he Yemen is the most clearly defined of all regions of Arabia". While it is tempting to project contemporary definitions of 'Yemen' back onto the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods, such definitions may lead to a biased understanding of how the inhabitants of South Arabia (the 'South Arabians') saw themselves and their neighbors.

On the one hand, it is true that the natural features of South Arabia's geography allowed its societies to develop distinct shared socio-political traits. Without the mountainous landscape that allowed for the development of terrace farming and large-scale irrigation, the social character of South Arabia would undoubtedly have looked very different. At the same time, it is not self-evident that the inhabitants of South Arabia's various states considered themselves to be a part of a single 'South Arabian' social group. Likewise, there is no evidence that the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula thought of themselves among similar lines. This is particularly important when reconstructing the social history of South Arabia during the late antique period.

The following section provides an overview of the different conceptions of ‘South Arabia’, beginning with a critical overview of Greek and Roman descriptions of the terms *Arabia felix* and *Arabia deserta*. Subsequently, there will be a brief discussion of the terms *Ymn* and *Ymnt*, attested in the South Arabian epigraphy, and their relation to the medieval Arabic term *al-Yaman*.

5.2.1. Geographic definitions of South Arabia in the pre-Islamic period

The notion that Greek and Roman authors had a clear understanding of the layout of the Arabian Peninsula which they divided up into an *Arabia felix* and an *Arabia deserta* is an anachronism. Even the ‘Arabians’ (Greek *arabioi*) were described by Herodotus (d. c. 425 BC) as living in the area between the Nile and the Red Sea up to the Sinai and Negev desert, rather than on the Arabian Peninsula (Macdonald 2009:8).

Furthermore, Retsö (2000) has pointed out that the first references to *Arabia eudaimon* in the Greek sources seem to not refer to South Arabia, but rather to the area around the Persian Gulf. Citing the authors Euhemerus and Iambulus, both likely active during the 3rd century BC, Retsö argues that a close reading of the material places their *Arabia eudaemon* in eastern rather than southern Arabia. Retsö (2000:190) suggests that this definition of *Arabia eudaemon* did not so much refer to the presence of frankincense in the region and the wealth associated with it, but instead stemmed from a Mesopotamian myth associating the island of Dilmun in the Persian Gulf with the birthplace of the gods.

It was only in the period following the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC) that Greek geographers gained a better understanding of the Arabian Peninsula’s geographic layout. As Ptolemaic and Seleucid expeditions were sent down the Persian and Red Gulfs and trade over the Indian Ocean increased, authors were able to describe Arabia’s natural borders more precisely (Burstein 1996; Macdonald 2009:17–19). Consequently, the Greek writer Agatharchides was able to describe the shape of the Arabian Peninsula relatively accurately, with later writers such as Strabo and Diodorus generally following his definitions (Macdonald 2009:18).²⁷⁴

The term ‘Arabia Felix’ did not yet refer to South Arabia at this time. The Greek geographer Erathosthenes, writing during the second half of the 3rd century BC used the term *Arabia eudaimon* to refer to the Peninsula as a whole, and was still in use as late as the 2nd century AD, during the time of Claudius Ptolemy (Retsö 2003). The restriction of Arabia Felix to refer specifically to only the frankincense and myrrh producing areas of South Arabia first occurs in the *Res*

²⁷⁴ The geographic boundaries of Arabia and the status of the ‘Arabians’ are two different discussions. As Macdonald points out, Agatharchides (and author Greek authors) considered many different peoples living in an area ranging from the western Red Seaboard up to southeastern Anatolia and down to southern Arabia to be ‘Arabians’ because they lived in ‘Arabia.’ This should be kept apart from the discussion whether these peoples considered themselves to be ‘Arabians’ or ‘Arabs’.

Gestae produced on behalf of the Roman emperor Augustus (reigned 27 BC to 14 AD). Retsö argues that the *Res Gestae* purposefully identified southwestern Arabia with *Arabia eudaimon* as a way to retroactively justify the failed campaign of Aelius Gallus, who, rather than reaching of the likely goal of the Persian Gulf, only came as far as Marib (Retsö 2003:233).

Similarly, there is no evidence from South Arabia that its inhabitants were aware of an ostensible connection between the region and the Graeco-Roman *Arabia Felix*. The term *Ymnt* does not seem to have carried any notions of felicity in the South Arabian epigraphy (Bashear 1989:336). Instead, in the South Arabian monumental inscriptions, the term *Ymnt* appears for the first time in the 3rd century AD as a part of the Ḥimyarite royal titulature and referred to a specific geographical part of South Arabia (Gajda 2009:195).

However, which area the term *Ymnt* specifically referred is uncertain. Unlike the other parts of South Arabia mentioned in the Ḥimyarite royal title, there is no evidence for a ‘kingdom of Ymnt’, similar to the kingdoms of Saba²⁷⁵ and Ḥadramawt. The vagueness of the term *Ymnt* in this context has received various explanations. Robin (2013:132–33) lists five of the most likely, ranging from:

- a) the southern part of the Arabian desert (the *Rubʿ al-Ḥālī*), east of Hadramawt
- b) the incense coast, south of Hadramawt
- c) the Hadramitic ‘southland’, with its capital at *Myfʿt*
- d) the area south of Saba²
- e) the east of what is now Yemen

Without additional evidence, it is difficult to determine more precisely what *Ymnt* was referring to exactly. However, it is unlikely that it referred to the entirety of South Arabia.²⁷⁵

The attestation of the nisba *Ymny* in some South Arabian inscriptions further complicates this problem. The term *Ymny* may have indicated self-identification even in the pre-Islamic period. Robin (2013:135–36) points out the existence two Sabaic inscriptions from what is now northern Saudi Arabia, dating to around the beginning of the Christian era. The authors of these inscriptions refer to themselves, apparently, as *Ymny*.

CRAI 2007:

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. <i>Whbtwn Ymny</i> | Wahb-Ṭawn, the <i>Ymny</i> |
| 2. <i>n ʿzgdyn</i> | the ʿAzgadī (?) |

RES 4264 (*Wādī Ramm*)

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Sʿkr Ymny</i> | <i>Sʿkr</i> , the <i>Ymny</i> |
| 2. <i>Hbsʿ</i> | <i>Hbsʿ</i> |

²⁷⁵ The equivocation of Sabaic *Ymnt* and the Arabic *al-Yaman* must also be rejected on linguistic grounds; one would have to explain the lack of definite marking and the loss of the feminine ending.

Considering the age of the inscriptions, which predate the usage of the term *Ymn* in the Ḥimyarite titulature by several centuries, Robin suggested that the nisba *Ymny* should probably be interpreted in the sense of “southerner” (2013:137). Normally, travelers from different South Arabian kingdoms identify themselves or are identified in terms of political allegiance. For example, in the mission mentioned in the Ḥadramitic inscription Ja 923 (RES 4909), the envoys Yadum (*Ydm*) and Maṭadum (*Mṛtdm*) are referred as “the two Ḥimyarites” (*Ḥmyryyh*).

Strategies of identification need not be mutually exclusive. Different ways of self-identification co-exist and may be used by the same person depending on the situation. The same author that may describe themselves as Sabaeen within the South Arabian cultural area, far outside it, may well have chosen to refer to himself simply as a “southerner”.

In conclusion, the two inscriptions mentioned above imply that the term *Ymny* may have already been in use during the pre-Islamic period, although likely rarely and predominantly as a general term meaning “southerner”.

5.2.2. South Arabia as a cultural unit: the construction of *al-Yaman*

Following the rise of Islam, the term *Yaman* gained a new social dimension. With the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate, both the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula and large parts of the Middle East were unified under a single state. At this point, several distinct social trends co-occurred, all of which are relevant for the development of the term *Yaman* in early Islam:

Firstly, the Muslim elite, initially ruling from Syria, and later Iraq, were politically dominant, but would constitute a religious minority for at least the first two centuries after the conquest (Bulliet 1979:107–9). The members of this elite needed a new shared identity to separate themselves from the conquered populations. It was at this point, during the 8th century, that the term ‘Arab’ (*‘arab*) widely gained support as a broad marker of self-identification amongst the Muslim elite (Webb 2016:183–85).

Secondly, as rifts began to emerge within this same elite, (self-)identification with either southern (*Yamānī*) or northern (*‘Adnānī*) tribal groups became a matter of serious political consequences. Political conflicts between various tribes could, and in many cases would, be projected back into a pre-Islamic northerner-southerner distinction, regardless of whether the tribes in question had had any physical connection to South Arabia. This will be discussed in more detail in section 5.3.2.

Thirdly, the question remains how the South Arabians who continued to reside in the region regarded themselves within the Islamic polity. As will be discussed in the following section (5.3.1), many of the same tribal groups that had resided in South Arabia in the pre-Islamic period remained there after the founding of the Islamic polity and the region’s integration therein.

The early Islamic period is characterized by a remarkable lack of consensus regarding the geographical definition of *al-Yaman* and a variety of traditions

regarding its geographical boundaries. As Webb (2021:286) points out, the term *al-Yaman* was used in Central Arabia not to refer to a specific region, but rather to indicate southern directionality from a Hijazi perspective. The restriction to what nowadays corresponds roughly to the country of Yemen did not emerge before the 4th/10th century (Bashear 1989:330). And as Bashear notes, distinguishing between a general ‘southern’ (*yamanī*) direction and a specific geographical area (*al-Yaman*) is not always a straightforward assignment.

The polysemy of ‘al-Yaman’ similarly gave rise to a various traditions regarding its etymology: the term *al-Yaman* was differently interpreted as referring either to its being located to the right (*yamīn*) or south (*yaman*) of Mecca. It was named so because it was settled by the Arabs who went south (*tayamma*) from Mecca after it grew overpopulated, or it was named *al-Yaman* after a legendary ancestor who was the first to settle the region (Bashear 1989:331–32).

If early Muslim scholars could not necessarily agree on the etymology of *al-Yaman*, they were also always in agreement whether the region was even really a part of Arabia. The process by which South Arabia came to be considered a part of the *ḡazīrat al-‘arab* (“Island of the Arabs”) was not straightforward either. During the first two centuries of Islam, there existed competing and occasionally mutually exclusive definitions of “Arabia”, referred to as the “land” (*‘arḍ*), “lands” (*bilād*) or the now current “Island (or Peninsula) of the Arabs” (*ḡazīrat al-‘arab*).

It is important to note that some of the definitions of Arabia excluded South Arabia altogether. For example, the 3rd/9th century historian Abū Zur‘a al-Dimašqī transmits an account stating that the Prophet performed the pilgrimage in the tenth year of the *hiḡra*, when “the Peninsula of the Arabs had converted, along with some of the people of *al-Yaman*” (*wa-qad ‘aslamat ḡazīratu l-‘arabi wa-man šā’a llāhu min ‘ahli l-yaman*) (al-Dimašqī 1996:169; Webb 2021:287).

Further evidence of competing notions of the *ḡazīrat al-‘arab* that excluded Yemen is found in Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/889) *al-Ma‘arif*. In this book, Ibn Qutayba gives various definitions of the *ḡazīrat al-‘arab*, one of which, attributed to al-Riyyāšī²⁷⁶ places the *ḡazīra* between Naḡrān and al-‘Uḡayb (*wa-ḥaddaṭa-nā al-riyyāšī ‘an-hu ‘inna-hū qāla ḡazīrat al-‘arab mā bayna naḡrān wa-l-‘uḡayb*). These accounts show that that during the first centuries of Islam, the position of *al-Yaman* as a part of Arabia was still being contested. Even after *al-Yaman* came to be seen as an intrinsic part of the *ḡazīrat al-‘arab*,²⁷⁷ it would take at least several centuries before a consensus regarding its geographical location was reached (Bashear 1989:330).

Bashear suggests that the partial semantic overlap between the Semitic root *ymn*, ‘to go right; felicitous; to go south’ informed the Greek *Arabia eudaemon* and Latin terms *Arabia Felix* (Bashear 1989:334). However, as was previously

²⁷⁶ Although Ibn Qutayba does not specify, this is probably the grammarian Abū l-Faḍl al-Riyyāšī (d. 257/871) (al-Sam‘ānī 1977a:209)

²⁷⁷ Thereby finally separating it from the Horn of Africa, with which it had arguably had stronger cultural connections than to the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, at least until the 6th century AD.

discussed, the original iteration of *Arabia eudaemon* lay in the Persian Gulf; an ostensible connection with Southwest Arabia may not be justifiable. There is some indication that in attempting to define South Arabia among geographical lines, early Muslim scholars relied on earlier Judaic and Graeco-Roman traditions. The similarities between Hebrew *tēmān* and the Arabic form *tayman* did not go unnoticed to Arab geographers and lexicographers (Bashear 1989:335).

In other words, the connection between felicity (*yumn*) and *al-Yaman* does clearly emerge in the Islamic period. As Bashear points out, the notion that “faith and wisdom are southern” (*al-ʿīmān yamān wa-l-ḥikma yamāniyya*) becomes an oft-repeated prophetic tradition, although in this context impossible to remove from the political context of the Abbasid period. Consequently, such prophetic traditions are not much use in determining how the geographic delineation of ‘al-Yaman’ developed.

Such linguistic similarities would further support the association of *al-Yaman* with “faith” (*ʿīmān*), a frequent which would be frequently cited in later *ḥadīth* collections (Bashear 1989:344–45). Traditions like these would come to play an important role during the middle Umayyad period, when South Arabians in Syria came to actively vie for political dominance in Syria (Donner 2016:196–97; Madelung 1986).

Conspicuously absent from these discussions is the role of language. None of the aforementioned authors seem to have pointed to South Arabia’s linguistic variety as to determine whether South Arabia was a part of the *ḡazīrat al-ʿarab* or not. This is particularly curious when considering the increasingly important role given to the Arabic language in the debates around ‘Arabness’ during the 3rd/9th–4th/10th centuries (Webb 2016:64–65). Although it is possible that some of the authors that excluded al-Yaman from their definitions of the *ḡazīrat* partially did so on linguistic grounds, they do not mention it.

An alternative explanation could be that these authors were simply not aware of South Arabia’s linguistic variety. As his name implies, al-Dimašqī had been born in Syria and his family had resided there for at least several generations, having moved there immediately after the Islamic conquests (al-Dimašqī 1996:17–19).²⁷⁸ Similarly, Ibn Qutayba had a Persian background, with his family originally residing in Khorasan (Lecomte 2012:843). As Webb has noted, few of the scholars who participated in the controversy about the definition of Yaman visited ever visited South Arabia themselves (Webb 2021:288–89).

To summarize: there is no evidence that the inhabitants of South Arabia considered themselves to belong to a larger community that also included the tribal groups of central and northern Arabia. There is similarly no evidence that the term *Ymn* or *Ymnt* were ever used in the pre-Islamic period to refer to South Arabia as a whole. During the early Islamic period, definitions of the term ‘al-Yaman’ were still in flux, and it would take at least several centuries before Muslim scholars

²⁷⁸ The editor notes that “the Banū Naṣr b. Muʿāwiya had been centered in Syria after the Islamic conquest” (*tamarkaza banū naṣra bni muʿāwiyata baʿda l-fatḥi l-islāmī la-hā*) (al-Dimašqī 1996:17).

came to agree on its geographical boundaries and whether or not it formed a part of the “lands of the Arabs”. Notably absent from these discussions is the linguistic character of South Arabia.

5.3. South Arabians in early Islam

In chapter 1 (1.5.2) it was mentioned that after South Arabia’s integration into the Islamic polity, certain pre-Islamic socio-political structures continued to exist. At the same time, documentary, epigraphic, and medieval literary accounts indicate that South Arabian individuals and tribal groups participated in the conquests and came to settle in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq (Al-Medej 1983:140–70; Donner 2016:118–19, 113, 219).

Medieval Muslim historians characterize the early Islamic military campaigns and settlement of the conquered provinces as dominated by tribes. Their accounts give the impression that the Muslim conquests represented a massive tribal exodus of Arabia, taking their families along with them and settling down in Egypt, Syria and Iraq nearly immediately after the dust of the battles had settled (Al-Medej 1983:141).

There are several issues with this narrative. Firstly, there is no evidence that the early Muslim armies were organized purely along tribal lines, nor is there any evidence of Muslim soldiers bringing their families with them *en masse*. The early conquests involved a relatively small number of well-organized supra-tribal military contingents (Donner 2016:221–23). This is in stark juxtaposition with later Muslim accounts, which speak in great detail about which individuals and tribes participated in which battles and at what moment (Kennedy 2008:59).

Secondly, accounts that discuss the participation of South Arabians in the early Islamic conquests do not always account for the socio-political processes by which certain tribes came to be considered ‘Yamani’ during the first centuries of Islam. It is not self-evident that all the tribal groups that came to align themselves with the ‘Yamani’ faction during the political crises of the Umayyad period had resided in South Arabia before the Islamic period (Webb 2021:283).

The following section seeks to contextualize the presence and participation of South Arabians in the Islamic military campaigns and their settlement in the conquered provinces by incorporating epigraphic and documentary material from the first centuries of Islam.

5.3.1. Epigraphic and documentary evidence

An early inscription from Cyprus attests to the participation of South Arabians in the early Islamic conquests. This inscription likely dates to the end of the 1st/7th century and was written by a soldier named Šarāḥīl al-^sAkkī (Imbert 2013):

Graffito C3

ʔllhm ʔgʃ[r] l-šr hyl bn rfyʕ ʔl[ʕk]y mn ʔhl [ʃl]styn.

ʔallahumma iġfir li-šarāḥīl bin raḫīʕ l-ʕa[kk]ī [ʔ] min ʔahl ʕīlaṣṭīn

“Allahumma, forgive Šarāḥīl, son of Raḫīʕ, al-ʕAkkī (?) from the troops of Palestine”.

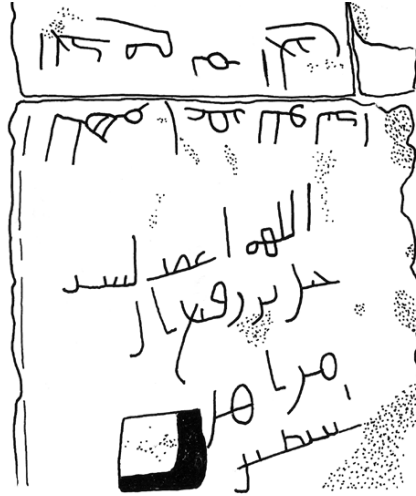


Figure 14: Facsimile of graffito C3 & C7 (adapted from (Imbert 2013)²⁷⁹)

The second half of the inscription’s second line is more difficult to interpret. Imbert suggests the reading al-ʕAkkī, “of Acre”. In light of the typically South Arabian personal name Šarāḥīl (Sabaic *S²rḥ^ʔl*), it is also possible that al-ʕAkkī refers to the South Arabian tribe of ʕAkk, which resided in the South Arabian coastal plain (the Tihāma) (Caskel 2012; Kaḥḥāla 1997). Later Muslim historians state that the Muslim general ʕAmr b. al-ʕĀṣ recruited up to 4,000 ʕAkkite tribesmen to participate in the conquest of Egypt, where many of them settled following the conquests (Al-Medej 1983:126; Kennedy 2008:64).

The personal name Šarāḥīl, too, suggests a South Arabian origin. Not only is this name frequently attested within the South Arabian epigraphic corpus as *s²rḥ^ʔl*,²⁸⁰ it is also virtually unknown outside of South Arabia before the 6th century. The earliest attestation of the name outside the South Arabian cultural area appears only at the very end of the pre-Islamic period, as the following bilingual Arabic-Greek inscription indicates:

²⁷⁹ Thanks go out to Professor Imbert, who kindly gave his permission to re-use his facsimile of the inscription.

²⁸⁰ According to DASi, the name *S²rḥ^ʔl* is attested over 60 times in the South Arabian epigraphic corpora, predominantly in Sabaic, but also in Minaic (once), Qatabanic (six times) and Ḥaḍramitic (twice).

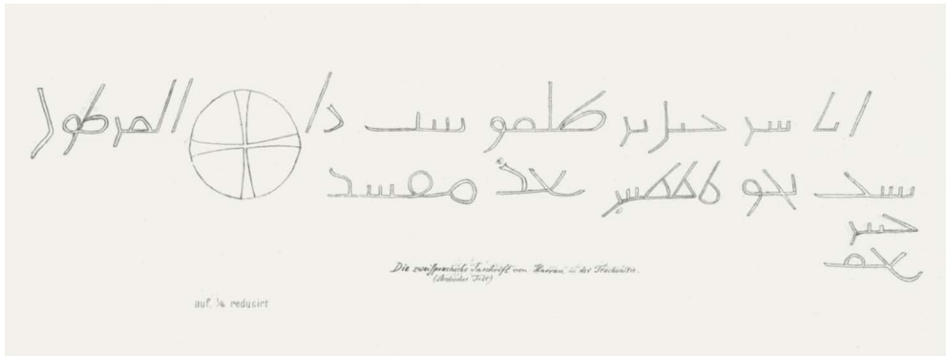


Figure 15: Šarāhīl b. Ṭālemū inscription (facsimile adapted from Schroeder (1884))

The first part of this inscription, up to the date, has been relatively uncontroversially interpreted:

ʔnʔ srhyl br tlmw bnyt dʔ ʔlmrṭwl snt (4x100 20 20 20 1 1 1)

ʔanā šarāhīl bin ṭālimū banayt(u) dā l-marṭūl sanat 463

“I, Šarāhīl, son of Ṭālemū constructed this monument/martyrion in the year 463”

Some differences of opinion exist whether the patronymic should be read as Zālimū or Ṭālimū. As the phoneme /z/ was probably still pronounced as a voiceless emphatic interdental [θʕ], the Greek transcription *Talemou* offers no particular help. More significantly controversial is the meaning of the last few words, whose various interpretations were discussed by Larcher and Cassuto (2020:40–1).²⁸¹

More pertinent to the current discussion is the linguistic character of the inscription. The text itself is composed entirely in Old Arabic.²⁸² Noting the author’s likely South Arabian origins, this would appear to confirm the notion that, by the 5th century, the linguistic Arabization of South Arabia was firmly underway.

In contrast to the epigraphic material from the Levant, comparatively more material exists in the form of papyri from Egypt. Due to Egypt’s dry climate, papyri are better preserved there than in the moister Levant and Mesopotamia. The early Islamic papyri from Egypt therefor give a particularly useful insight into the physical presence of South Arabians there.

One of these papyri, which dates either the 1st/7th or 2nd/8th century lists a number of individuals and their tribal allegiance names the South Arabian tribes Maʿāfir (*Mʿfr*) and Sabā (or Sabaʿ) (*Sbʔ*), and possibly *ʔAsd*, depending on the reading (Sijpestein 2008):

²⁸¹ The possible solutions range from *baʿd maḥsad hīnaʿiḍin nʿim*, “after [he who is] corrupted, prosperity”; *baʿd maḥsad Ḥaybar bi-ʿām*, “one year after the expedition of Ḥaybar” and *baʿd muqaddas Ḥanān niʿam*, “In honor of St. John. Mercy.” (Larcher and Cassuto 2020:40–41)

²⁸² Noting also the Arameogram *bar* in lieu of Arabic *b[i]n*, typical for paleo-Arabic texts.

OI 17656

14. *yzyd bn ʔby smr ʔlmʕʕr[y]/[w]mzlh fy bny sryʕ ʔlmʕʕr*²⁸³

17. *ʕbdʔllh bn yzyd ʔl[sb]ʔy yskn fy sbʔ*

14. Yazīd b. ʔAbū Šammar [ʔ] al-Maʕāfirī and his dwellings in Banū Surayʕ [of] al-Maʕāfir

17. ʕAbdallāh b. Yazīd, the Sabaeen, residing (*yaskun*) with Sabā

Another Egyptian papyrus from 77 AH/707 AD details a legal transaction between a freedwoman and a member of the tribes of Yaḥṣub and Sulaf, which are attested in the South Arabian epigraphy as *Yḥṣb* and *Sʕlf*, respectively (Khan 1994:359–61):

Michaelides 744 B

2. *brʔh lhmylh mwlt ʔm hnydt*

3. [...] *lsʕyd bn*

4. *qys ʔlyḥṣby ʔdlʔly* [...]

8. [...] *shd ḥmyr*

9. *bn šrhʔl ʔklʔy tm ʔlsfy*

10. [...] *mḥmr bn ʕqyb ʔlmʕʕry*

“A quittance for Ğamīla, the freedwoman of ʔUmm Hunayda (...) which she paid to Saʕīd, son of Qays al-Yaḥṣibī al-Dallālī (...) witnessed by Ḥimyar, son of Šarāḥīl al-Kalāʕī al-Sulafī (...) and Miḥmar b. ʕUkayb al-Maʕāfirī”

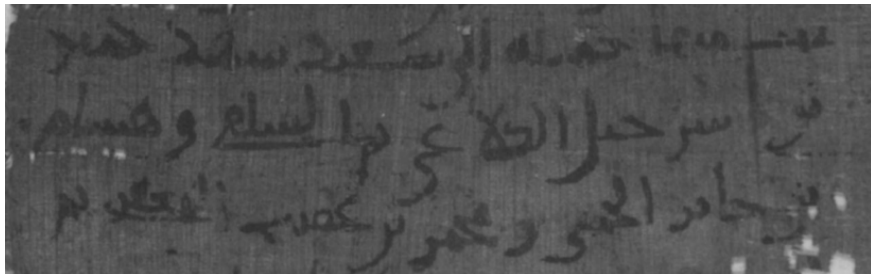


Figure 16: The personal name Ḥimyar, son of Šarāḥīl al-Kalāʕī attested in the 8th century papyrus Michaelides 744 B (adapted from (Khan 1994:358)

As Khan already pointed out, all of the lineages (*nisbas*) mentioned in this papyrus are of South Arabian origin (Khan 1994:362). Most of these are also attested in the pre-Islamic epigraphy.²⁸⁴ This also seems to be confirmed by the medieval Islamic tradition. Al-Medej makes note of the “Yemeni [sic] migrants whose tribes settled near each other and were in control of most of the lands of the town” (Al-Medej 1983:153).

The Muslim genealogist and historian Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/818) mentions in his *Nasab Maʕadd wa-l-yaman al-kabīr* that the Banū Surayʕ were one of the tribes

²⁸³ Unfortunately, I was not able to access an image of the papyrus in question.

²⁸⁴ For example, the tribal names *Mʕʕry*, *Sryʕ*, *Sbʔ* and *Klʕy* are attested in the South Arabian epigraphic record as *q-mʕʕr*, *sʕrʕm*, *sʕbʔ* and *q-klʕ* (see also Robin 2013:165; 179).

that settled in Egypt, and that they possessed a mosque in [the district of] Maʿāfir (*la-hum masǧid bi-l-maʿāfir*) (Ibn al-Kalbī 2003:341). The much later Egyptian historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 845-6/1442) confirms this, mentioning the districts (*hiṭaṭ*) of Yaḥṣub, Dū al-Kalāʿ, and Maʿāfir, revealing a significant degree of continuity (al-Maqrīzī 1995:36).

The attestation of papyri from the Islamic period outside of Egypt are rare,²⁸⁵ and the usage of paper would not become widespread until the 10th century (Shatzmiller 2018). Nevertheless, later Muslim historical writing may give some clues as to the presence and participation of South Arabians in the conquest and settlement of Syria and Iraq. Although the usage of onomastics to track the movement of social groups is controversial, the pre-Islamic epigraphic material from South Arabia can help contextualize the medieval accounts.

While correspondences between the epigraphic material and medieval Muslim accounts exist, some caution should be exercised in approaching this material. Although the presence of personal and tribal names suggests the movement of South Arabians during the early conquests, using these names as evidence of their continued presence tends to be overly positivistic. Furthermore, from that, it is possible that later accounts embellished the achievements of South Arabian commanders during the conquests as a way to provide retroactive justifications for the settlement of a region.

For example, al-Medej, citing al-Balādurī (d. 892) and pseudo-al-Wāqidī²⁸⁶ suggests that the city of Ḥimṣ was awarded to the South Arabian tribes of Ḥimyar and Hamdān after several hundreds of their tribesmen died during its siege (Al-Medej 1983:124). Caliphal assent could also strengthen post-conquest claims. Al-Medej mentions an account that al-Ṣimt al-Kindī asked ʿUmar b. ʿAffān to be reunited with his son Ṣurahbīl, who subsequently moved to Ḥimṣ (Al-Medej 1983:142). During the middle 8th century, Ḥimṣ developed into one of the centers of anti-Umayyad political ‘Yamanism’ (Madelung 1986). While it is likely that some South Arabians had genuinely settled in Ḥimṣ and came to impact its local politics, it is not a given that this was the direct result of an unbroken process beginning with the conquests.

To summarize: an evaluation of the epigraphic and documentary material shows that South Arabian individuals and tribesmen physically participated during the early Islamic conquests. The presence of personal and tribal names attested in the pre-Islamic South Arabian epigraphic corpus and the early Islamic inscriptions and documents seem to confirm this.

It is notable, however, that beyond this, there is little linguistic material that is typically South Arabian. With the exception of the South Arabian genitive exponent *d-*, used to indicate tribal affiliation, the linguistic character of the

²⁸⁵ As far as I am aware there is only a singular Arabic papyrus found in Mesopotamia, produced at a Nestorian monastery in the year 855 AD.

²⁸⁶ Usually attributed to al-Wāqidī (d. 873), most scholars now consider the book to have been written centuries after his death, likely around the time of the First Crusade (11th–12th century) (Shoshan 2016:13)

inscriptions and documents do not appear to betray features discussed in chapter 4. In the case of the documentary material, this is not as remarkable as the scribes of this period wrote in Arabic.

However, with regards to the epigraphic material, more variation would be expected. For example, both the pre-Islamic Harran and the early Islamic C3 graffito from Cnydos were composed by what seem to have been South Arabians. However, neither inscription contains any linguistic features discussed in the previous chapters.

5.3.2. South Arabian identity in early Islam

Several important social realignments took place during the first two centuries of Islam. A major controversy of the 8th century concerned the identity of the political elite that had become dominant over the newly conquered regions. Eventually, the political elite adopted the term as a way of distinguishing themselves from the conquered peoples (Webb 2021:287). After the various Arabian tribes had come to see themselves as *ʿarab*, the next controversy arose, regarding the division of the *ʿarab* into a northern and a southern branch.

Firstly, within the conquered provinces social distinctions that had separated the tribal communities that had resided within the South Arabian heartland and those outside became less important. A good example of this is the development of Kinda and Maḏhiġ. In the pre-Islamic period, these tribal groups had been Ḥimyarite vassals. By the early Islamic period, however, they had functionally become on par with Ḥimyar. Members of these various South Arabian tribes that had not necessarily been politically or socially aligned during the pre-Islamic period adopted the term ‘southerners’ (*yamānī*).

Secondly, starting from the Umayyad period onwards, the understanding and usage of the term *Yamanī* began to change. As social tensions in the Umayyad caliphate intensified, certain tribes would align themselves with the Yemeni political faction. Although evidently connected etymologically to the term *yamanī*, ‘southerner’, inclusion in this political faction did not require any physical connection to South Arabia (Webb 2021:288). During this time certain tribes, some of whom had not ever resided in South Arabia, re-constructed their genealogies to claim South Arabian descent. This would eventually crystallize in the distinction between Qaḥṭānīs, ‘southern Arabs’ and ʿAdnānīs, ‘northern Arabs’ (Webb 2016:222–224)

From the middle Umayyad period onwards, two distinct processes were at play. One of these was the integration of various South Arabian tribes into a single ‘southern’ (*yamānī*) supra-tribal community, *Yaman*. This term gained a political dimension within the context of the social tensions of the Umayyad caliphate. A case in point is the transformation of the Syrian tribe Qudāʿa from an original northern Maʿaddī into a southern Yamānī tribe (Crone 1994:46–47).

The different usages of Yamānī could occasionally reinforce each other. As mentioned before, the city of Ḥimṣ in Syria came to be predominantly settled by South Arabians. Some of the South Arabian tribes mentioned by Ibn ʿAsākir

(Al-Medej 1983:145) include al-Awza^s, al-Ṣadif and Muqrī, which are attested in the epigraphy as *Wzʿn*²⁸⁷, *Ṣdfn*²⁸⁸ and *Mqr[ʿ]m*²⁸⁹. Of particular note is the presence of Dū Ruʿayn (*d-Rʿyn*), a minor Ḥimyarite tribal confederation that possibly rose to prominence in late pre-Islamic and early Islamic South Arabia (Robin and Schiettecatte 2013:193–94). Following the outbreak of political chaos after the death of Muʿāwiya in 680, a particular religious tradition developed in Ḥimṣ, which combined South Arabian exceptionalism with messianic expectations of a Ḥimyarite restoration (Madelung 1986:149).

The physical presence of South Arabian settlers in Syria and the instabilities of the early Umayyad caliphate would prove to be a dangerous combination. Syrian antiquarians and transmitters of *ḥadīṭ* latched of South Arabian latched on to their ancestors’ pre-Islamic history in order to promote their political cause. Madelung focuses in particular on the transmission of Rāšid b. Saʿd, one of whose *ʿahādīṭ* states: ‘this matter was amongst Ḥimyar, then God took it away from them and gave it to Qurayš. But it will return to them’ (*kāna ḥādā l-ʿamru fī ḥimyar fa-nazaʿa-hū llāhu min-hum wa-ḡaʿala-hū qurayšin wa-sa-yaʿūdu ʿilay-him*) (al-Marwazī 1991:384).²⁹⁰ A similar *ḥadīṭ*, also attributed to Rāšid b. Saʿd exalts Ḥimyar by having the Prophet describe them as his helpers (*ʿaʿwān*).²⁹¹

Apart from prophetic sayings, the pre-Islamic inscriptions of South Arabia, which had at this point become functionally inaccessible to Muslim scholars (see also 4.5.2.) became a valuable trope on which they could project the idea of a ‘Ḥimyarite’ political restoration. Several early Islamic authors refer to an alleged inscription prophesizing the Ḥimyarites’ return to power, which is transmitted with multiple minor yet important differences. Michael Cook, who made a thorough study of this poem and its transmission reconstructs the following form (Cook 2022:7–9):

At the time Zafār was built, she was asked “To whom do you belong?”; she replied: “To the good Ḥimyarites.”

Then she was asked “What then?” and replied: “My kingdom goes to the evil Abyssinians.”

²⁸⁷ Ja 632-1: *Ḥmʿtt ʿrsʿl bn Rʿbm w-Mḥqbm bn Wzʿn*, “Ḥamʿaṭat Aarsal of Riʿbam and Muḥiqbam of Wazʿān”

²⁸⁸ Schm/Mārib 28-12: *w-qdm-hmw Ṣdfn w-ʿbʿl Sʿbm*, “they raided Ṣadfān and the lords of Ṣībām”

²⁸⁹ The form *Mqrʿm* is attested in a single inscription (Ja 576+Ja 577-13: *w-ʿrdt Yḥbsʿr w-Mqrʿm w-Sʿddm*, “and the land of Yuhib^sar and Muqrīʿm and Ṣaddād whereas *Mqrm* is attested in nine inscriptions (e.g., *Rznm bn Sʿfrm ʿbd bn Mqrm*, “Raznām of Safrām, servant of the tribe (?) Muqrīm”)

²⁹⁰ The earliest source is apparently Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād al-Marwazī’s (d. 843), *Kitāb al-fatn*, which who gives a slightly different form *wa-ṣayyara-hū fī qurayš*.

²⁹¹ ‘Indeed, God has promised me Persia and Rome, their women and their sons, their armor and their treasures, and he has granted me Ḥimyar as helpers’ (*ʿinna llāha taʿālā waʿadā-nī fārīsa ṭumma l-rūm ṭumma nisāʿa-hum ʿanbāʿa-hum wa-laʿmata-hum wa kunūza-hum wa-ʿamaddanī bi-ḥimyarā ʿaʿwānan*) (al-Marwazī 1991:498)

Then she was asked “What then?” and replied: “My kingdom goes to the noble Persians.”

Then she was asked “What then?” and replied: “My kingdom goes to Quraysh the merchants.”

Then she was asked “What then?” and replied “My kingdom will return to the Himyarites”²⁹²

This is cited, for example in Ibn Ḥurradābah’s (d. 913) *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*.²⁹³ For example, the Ibn Saqqā edition of Ibn Hišām’s *Sīra*, the city mentioned is not Zafār, but rather Ḍamār (*li-man mulku ḍamār*)²⁹⁴ (Ibn Hišām and Ibn Ishāq 1990:72). Furthermore, rather than appearing on a gate, the inscription is supposed to have been written in the *zabūr* script on a rock (*kāna fī ḥaḡarin bi-l-yamani kitābun bi-l-zabūri*).

Early medieval Yemeni antiquarians also used the inscription-as-trope format to portray South Arabia as a pre-Islamic ‘sacred geography’. For example, a large part of the 8th volume of al-Hamdānī’s *Kitāb al-Iklīl* is dedicated to *qubūriyyāt*, a literary genre about ancient tombs and gravesites. Certain *qubūriyyāt* overlap with Quranic narratives, particularly those associated with ‘Arabian prophets’²⁹⁵ but many concern the pre-Islamic Himyarite kings as well. A particularly intriguing example of this occurs in Ibn Kalbī’s *Nasab Maʿadd wa-l-Yaman al-Kabīr*, where recounts the following anecdote:

“Al-Kalbī heard the following from a man of Ḥimyar, from Ḍū al-Kalāʿ, who said: ‘Once a flood came and perforated a place in al-Yaman where it uncovered the vaulted dome. Then they went in and look! There was a [dead] man sitting on a chair wearing a colorful, gilded robe, with a rock between his hands and a red emerald on his head. And look! There was a slab, upon which was written: ‘In your name *allahumma*, lord of Ḥimyar! I am Ḥassān, son of ʿAmr, the *qayl*. But there is no *qayl* but God! [...]’”²⁹⁶

²⁹² As Cook notes, the several of the editions of works containing this poem are full of errors, e.g., the editor of al-Marwazī’s *Fitan* reads *ḥimyar al-ʿaḥbār*, ‘Ḥimyar of the reports’ rather than *ʿaḥyār*, ‘Ḥimyar the good’, the nonsensical *ḥimyar saḥḥār*, ‘Ḥimyar, a sorcerer’ (Cook 2022).

²⁹³ Ibn Hišām’s *Kitāb al-siyar wa-l-maḡāzī* states instead that the lines were found in a book (*wa-kāna fī zafāra ʿiṣṭiwānun mina l-baladī l-ḥarāmi maktūbun fī ʿalā-hā bi-kitābin mina l-kitāb al-ʿawwal*).

²⁹⁴ Notably, Ibn Hišām, citing Ibn Ishāq initially states that “Ḍimār [sic] is ‘Yemen or Ṣanʿā’ (*al-yamanu ʿaw ṣanʿāʿu*) before adding ‘Ibn Hišām says: Ḍamār, with a *fathā*, according to what Yūnus told me’ (*ḍamār bi-l-faḥḥati fīmā ʿaḥbaranī yūnus*).

²⁹⁵ For example, al-Hamdānī places the grave of the prophet Hūd (mentioned in Qurʾān 11:50–52) in Ḥaḍramawt (al-Hamdānī 1979:141).

²⁹⁶ *ḍakara l-kalbīyyu ʿan raḡulin min ḥimyara min ḍī l-kalāʿi qāla ʿaqbala sīlun fa-ḥaraqa mawḍiʿan bi-l-yamani fa-ʿabdā ʿan ʿazḡin fa-daḡala fī-hi fa-ʿidā raḡulun ʿalā sarīrin mayyitin ʿalayhi ḡibābun waṣīyyin muḍhabatun wa-bayna yaday-hi ḥaḡarun min ḍahabin fī raʿsi-hī yāḡūtun ḥamrāʿu wa-ʿidā lawḥun fī-hi maktūbun bismi llāhi ʿanā ḥassān bnu ʿamri l-qaylu ʿidā lā qayla ʿillā llāhi*

Similar funerary inscription narratives exist in the context of South Arabia.²⁹⁷ However, the one transmitted by Ibn al-Kalbī is particularly notable as it portrays the pre-Islamic Ḥimyarites as perfect monotheists. A clear indication of this is the combination of the *basmala* followed by the phrase ‘Lord of Ḥimyar’ (*rabb Ḥimyar*). The usage of the term *qayl*, a typical ‘Ḥimyaricism’ is also notable in the declaration ‘there is *qayl* but God’ (*ʿid lā qayla ʿillā llāh*).²⁹⁸ Examples of ancient writings in Himyaritic spread far beyond South Arabia. For example, in the Riyāḍ al-Nufūs of the 11th century author Abū Bakr al-Mālikī, the following line occurs:

“On the account of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ziyād b. ʿAnʿam, who said: ‘When I was a young man I was with my uncle in Carthage. And look! I saw a gravestone there, upon which was written in Himyaritic: ‘I am ʿAbdallāh b. al-ʿArāšī, messenger of the Prophet of God Šāliḥ. He sent me to the people of this city to call them to God. I appeared to them; they slew me unjustly. God will hold them to account.’”²⁹⁹

Similarly, ‘Ḥimyaritic’ writing was alleged to have been left on one of the city gates of Samarqand. The 4th/10th century geographer Ibn Ḥawqal mentions the following (Ibn Ḥawqal 1964:407):

“Abū Bakr al-Dimašqī related the following: ‘On [Samarqand’s] large gate a an iron sheet and upon it there was a some writing. The people claimed that it was in Ḥimyaritic, and that they had preserved the art of that [writing] since the time of Tubbaʿ.’”³⁰⁰

²⁹⁷ These *qubūriyya*-type narratives tend to have the following narrative structure: the (accidental) discovery of a tomb, the presence of deceased body – often in an uncorrupted state – and an inscription relating to the person’s life. Subsequently, the grave is sealed up again. While such narratives are relatively uncommon, Ibn Hišām recounts an anecdote pertaining ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāmir, who is said to have brought monotheism to South Arabia (Ibn Iṣḥāq 2001:8). Furthermore, the eighth volume of al-Hamdānī’s *Kitāb al-Iklīl* contains an entire chapter of these *qubūriyyāt*, and some also appear in the *Kunūz al-fawāʿid* of the Shiʿite scholar Abū l-Faṭḥ al-Karāḡukī (d. 449/1057). However, recently Adam Bursi investigated the ‘holy corpse’ narrative with regards to the early Islamic figure of Ṭalḥa b. ʿUbayd Allāh, suggesting that perhaps such stories were more widespread than commonly assumed (Bursi 2018).

²⁹⁸ Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933) recounts essentially the same anecdote in his *Kitāb al-Iṣṭiqāq* with some minor changes in vocabulary. For example, the *basmala* is replaced with the phrase *bismika llāhumma*, ‘in your name, O God’ and *rabb Ḥimyar* ‘lord of Ḥimyar’ is replaced with *ʿilāhu ḥimyar*, ‘god of Ḥimyar’ (Ibn Durayd 1411:524)

²⁹⁹ *ʿani abd al-raḥmāni bni ziyādin ibni ʿanʿama qāla kuntu wa-ʿanā ḡulāmun maʿa ʿammī bi-qartāniḡata fa-ʿidā bi-qabrin maktubun ʿalayhi bi-l-ḥimyarīyyati ʿanā ʿabdu llāhi bnu l-ʿarāšī rasūlu rasūli llāhi šāliḡin baʿaṡa-nī ila ʿahli hāḡihī l-qaryati ʿadʿū-hum ʿilā llāhi ʿataytu-hum ḡahyan qatalū-nī ḡaliman ḡasību-humu llāh*

³⁰⁰ *wa-ʿaḡbara-nī abū bakri l-dimašqī qāla: raʿaytu ʿalā bābi-hā l-kabīr ṡafīḡatan ḡadīdan [sic!] wa-ʿalay-hā kitābatun zaʿama ʿahlu-hā ʿanna-hā bi-l-ḥimyarīyyati wa-ʿanna-hum yuwāḡirūna ʿilma ḡālīka min ʿanna-ha min ṡanʿati tubbaʿin.*

kings as exemplary proto-Muslims while also retroactively justifying a Himyarite return to power.

The usage of South Arabian terms, particularly in combination with Islamic phrases is how South Arabian authors came to construct the region as a sacred space. Another example of this phenomenon is the way how early Islamic scholars came to explain the relationship between South Arabia and the Quran.

5.4. South Arabia as sacred space: the case of Quranic exegesis

The reimagining of South Arabia as a monotheistic ‘sacred space’ was not limited to early Islamic antiquarianism. Although certain Quranic narratives came to be associated with or set in South Arabia, it is worth noting that the Quran rarely mentions specific places.³⁰⁷ Consequently, exegetes were relatively free in interpreting the localities in which Quranic narratives take place.

The most ubiquitous are the events surrounding the “Companions of the Pit” (*ʿaṣḥāb al-ʿuḥdūd*), taken to be a reference to the persecution of Nağrān’s Christian community during the reign of Dū Nuwās,³⁰⁸ and the two references to Sabaʿ in chapters 27 and 34 respectively. Furthermore, certain other events and locales are associated with pre-Islamic South Arabian history, most commonly the “Companions of the Elephant” (*ʿaṣḥāb al-fīl*), as well as the location of ʿĀd and its corresponding city of ʿIram.

However, a closer investigation of the Quranic material problematizes what appear to be ‘obvious’ references to South Arabia. Cook (2008:142–144) critiqued the notion that the *ʿaṣḥāb al-ʿuḥdūd* narrative was based on historical events in the first place and pointed out the contradictions between the exegesis of Quran 85:4–10 and the narrative presented therein. More recently, Silverstein (2019:283) reanalyzed the rhetorical and theological elements of the Quranic *ʿaṣḥāb al-ʿuḥdūd* narrative and came to the conclusion that a antecedent for the narrative is the events of the Biblical Daniel 3, rather than the Martyrs of Nağrān.

The term *ʿuḥdūd* caused a problem for the early lexicographers. They were uncertain whether the term was a plural, in which case its singular form would have been *ḥadd* or whether a singular noun with a plural form *ʿaḥādīd*. The latter is found, for example, in the work of the lexicographer Ibn al-Sikkīt (1998:433). Interestingly, although most modern researchers indicate that the term *ʿuḥdūd*

³⁰⁷ This can partially be attributed to the notion that the Quran’s author assumed a familiarity with the narratives that the Quran comments upon (Dost 2017:121) For example, *sūrat Yūsuf*, itself is one of few Quranic chapters that follows a clear chronological narrative, is functionally a retelling of the Joseph story of the Bible (Genesis 37) and therefor takes place in Egypt. However, Egypt mentioned only twice, once in verse 21 (*qāla ʿallaḏī ṣtarā-hu min miṣr*) and once at the end of the *sūra* (12:99 *wa-qāla dhulū miṣra ʿin šā llāhu ʿamīna*).

³⁰⁸ For the explicit identification of the *ʿaṣḥāb al-ʿuḥdūd* with the Martyrs of Nağran, see Moberg (1924:cv) and Shahīd (1971:46–68).

was borrowed from a South Arabian language (predominantly on morphological grounds), the exegetes themselves seem to have been unaware of this (Hayajneh 2011:134–36)

Similarly, although it is likely that the Quranic narratives of Saba² – particularly in light of the obvious linguistic parallels – refer to events occurring in South Arabia, it does not necessarily follow that early Muslim scholars conceived of them as such. The first of the two Saba² narratives in the Quran has an obvious Biblical antecedent, as it is functionally a repetition of the story of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1–10) (Dost 2017:152). The second reference occurs in Quran 34 with the eponymous title *saba*². According to this narrative, Saba² is granted two gardens, which, as a form of punishment on account of them “having turned away” (*ʿaridū*) and “deceived themselves” (*wa-ḡalamū ʿanfusa-hum*) and are destroyed by a flood (*ṣayl al-ʿarim*). A common positivist reading of the aforementioned verses considers them to refer to a partial or total collapse of the dam of Mārib, either the one referred to in ʿAbraha’s inscription (CIH 541) or another collapse occurring at a later stage (Gajda 2009:60; Robin 2011).³⁰⁹

Although it cannot be dismissed that certain historical events in South Arabia may have inspired the aforementioned Quranic narratives, they were not necessarily a part of the framework in which the earliest exegetes were working. For example, the Quranic references to *ṣayl al-ʿarim* are often taken to refer to a final collapse of the Marib dam with disastrous results for the inhabitants of South Arabia.³¹⁰

In Muḡāhid b. Ḡabr’s (d. 722) *tafsīr*, the *ṣayl al-ʿarim* is interpreted simply as a “flood of red water” (*hādā l-ṣayl māʿ ʿaḡmar*).³¹¹ The later exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767) interprets the *ṣayl al-ʿarim* to have affected a very broad region, ranging from al-Yaman to “the Holy Land” (*arḍ al-muqaddasa*) (Muqātil ibn Sulaymān 2002:529–30).³¹² These traditions are more reminiscent of primordial flood myths with parallels in Biblical and Mesopotamian stories, rather than the recounting of a historical event limited to South Arabia (Averbeck 2002:90).

It is only from the late 9th century onwards that the explicit localization of the *ṣayl al-ʿarim* in South Arabia becomes more common. The earliest extant connection between the *ṣayl* and the Marib dam is found amongst the notes of Ibn Hišām (d. 830) in his *sīra*, where it serves as a narrative device to explain the ‘scattering of the Azd’ (Ibn Ishāq 2001:693). Some decades later, the same

³⁰⁹ See also the discussion above (1.4.3.).

³¹⁰ The positivist interpretation of the *ṣayl al-ʿarim* narrative in *sūrah saba*² (34:14) is ubiquitous, occurring both scholarly articles and books (Fleitmann et al. 2022; Kennedy 2008:197; Robin 1996:1144) as well as in popularizing works (Breton 1999:19).

³¹¹ It seems noteworthy that Muḡāhid goes out of his way to state that the floodwaters were red as a form of punishment (*fa-lam yakun l-māʿu l-ʿaḡmar fī l-saddi wa-lākinna-hū kāna ʿuḡāban ʿarsala-hū ʿalayhim min ḡaytu yuṣāʿu*).

³¹² Amended to *al-ʿarḍ al-muqaddasa* by the editor, although *ʿarḍ al-muqaddas* may have been Muqātil’s intended form (compare *bayt al-maqdis*).

narrative appears in al-Balāḍūrī’s (d. 279/892) genealogical work *al-Ansāb al-ʿašraf*, which states “when God sent upon the children of Saba’ in Ma’rib the *sayl al-ʿarim*”.³¹³

The first extant connection of the *sayl al-ʿarim* with Marib in the exegetical tradition occurs as late as the middle of the 11th century, with al-Ṭāʿlabī’s (d. 1035) *al-Kašf wa-l-bayyān*. In it, al-Ṭāʿlabī gives various explanations of the phrase ‘visible towns between them and the cities that we have blessed’ (*al-qurā ʿallatī bāraka-nā fī-hā qurā zāhira*), with one of these explanations – attributed to Saʿīd b. Ğubayr – referring to the ‘towns between Marib and Syria (*al-qurā ʿallatī mā bayna maʿrib wa-l-šām*) (al-Ṭāʿlabī 2002:86).

Al-Ṭāʿlabī’s statement implicitly connects the *sayl al-ʿarim* and Marib, but the first truly explicit statements that identifies the collapse of the Marib dam with the occurs a few decades later, in the al-Wāḥidī’s *al-Wasīṭ fī tafsīr al-qurʾān* (al-Wāḥidī 1994:491)

“So, [the soothsayer] had seen in her prediction (*kahāna*) that the dam of Marib would be destroyed and that the flood of the dam (*sayl al-ʿarim*) would reach it and destroy the two gardens”.³¹⁴

A comparison of the material thus shows that while a narrative connecting a collapse of the Marib dam and the *sayl al-ʿarim* narrative found in the Quran had existed since the 3rd/9th century, it did not become dominant until the 5th/11th century AD. The aforementioned *tafsīr* of al-Ṭāʿlabī shows that various narratives existed side-by-side, as the “visible villages” (*qūra zāhira*) are varyingly explained as referring to the Arab villages between Medina and Syria (*qurā ʿarabiyya bayna l-madīna wa-l-šām*), the Sarawāt mountain range (*al-sarawāt*) and Ṣanʿāʾ (*hiya qurā ṣanʿāʾ*).³¹⁵

It is also significant that the first extant references to the *sayl al-ʿarim* narrative do not occur in works of Quranic exegesis. Both Ibn Hišām’s notes and al-Balāḍūrī’s *al-Ansāb al-ʿašraf* are concerned with genealogy, and the connection to the Quranic *sayl al-ʿarim* functions primarily to explain the migration of tribes away out of South Arabia towards other parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

The term *ʿarim* itself was recognized as South Arabian in origin, although the interpretations of its meaning differed significantly. As Elmaz notes, the early exegetes saw the term as South Arabian in origin, with Zayd b. ʿAlī (d. 740) interpreting the term as referring to a “dam” in the “language of al-Yaman” (*bilisān al-yaman*) (Elmaz 2016:234).

Another example of the same process concerns the interpretation of the term *sabaʿ*. Although the notion that the Arabic term *sabaʿ* is derived directly from the

³¹³ *fa-lamma ʿarsala llahū ʿazz wa-ğall ʿalā waladi sabaʿin bi-maʿriba mā ʿarsala min sayli l-ʿarimi wa-huwa sadd kāna la-hum bayna ġabalayni tafarraqati l-ʿasdu*

³¹⁴ *wa-kānat qad raʿat fī kahānati-hā ʿanna sadda sa-yuḥrabu wa-ʿanna-hu sa-yaʿatī saylu l-ʿarim fa-yahrubu l-ğannatayni*

³¹⁵ Also note the apparent juxtaposition of *qurā ʿarabiyya*, which are said to have laid between Mecca and Syria, as compared to the (non-ʿarabiʿ?) villages of the Sarawāt and Ṣanʿāʾ.

South Arabian *sʿbʿ* seems obvious, this was seemingly not the case for the early Islamic community. In fact, reading the early exegetic material would suggest that the early Muslims were unable to establish whether the term *sabaʿ* referred to a man, a woman, a country, or something else.³¹⁶

The anthropomorphic reading of *Sabaʿ* as the name of a person first appears in the *tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān, who simply refers to him as Zaġl b. Yašġub b. Yaʿrub b. Qaḥtān. In the next century, this tradition becomes more elaborate. The *tafsīr* of the Iraqī scholar Yaḥyā b. Sallām (d. 200/815) is the first extant attestation of a tradition presenting *sabaʿ* as the progenitor of various Arab tribes.

According to this tradition, the Prophet is asked whether term *sabaʿ* is a land (*ʿarḍ*) or a woman. The Prophet responds, that *sabaʿ* is neither, but rather a man to whom ten sons were born, each bearing the name of a corresponding Arab tribe and divides them into a “southern” (*yamāniyya*) and “northern” (*šāmiyya*) branch, respectively.³¹⁷ Such accounts could then be interwoven with and lend credence to similar “dispersion of the Arabs” narratives, which again, conceived of South Arabia as the Arabs’ original homeland.

That this process was neither immediate nor uncontroversial can be determined by exegetic interpretations that did not enter the mainstream. Both western scholarship and traditional Islamic exegesis generally came to see Dū al-Qarnayn, mentioned in the Quran’s eighteenth chapter (al-Kahf, 83–101) as representing Alexander the Great.³¹⁸ However, before the 3rd/9th century there were various narratives at play. Wheeler (1998:201–202) distinguishes three different narratological strands that contributed to the development of the Islamic Alexander legend.

The first derives of these from a Greek recension, the second from the Babylonian Talmud and the third from a South Arabian tradition regarding a Ḥimyarite king named Ṣaʿb dū Marāṭid. Although certain narrative elements of the South Arabian narrative were retained in the general legend,³¹⁹ eventually the identification of Dū al-Qarnayn as a Ḥimyari ruler was eventually discarded in favor of Alexander the Greta (Weinfield 2008:100–101).

³¹⁶ The lack of consensus on how to interpret the term is further solidified by the fact that some transmitters of the Quranic reading variants read *sabaʿ* as a triptote (i.e., *sabaʿ-ʿun/-an/-in*), others as a diptote (i.e., *sabaʿ-ʿu/-a/-a*) and others still without any vocalization (i.e., *sabaʿ*) (Nasser 2020:189)

³¹⁷ The tradition gives the Arab tribes as Maḍḥiġ, Kinda, al-ʿAzd, al-ʿAšʿariyyūn, ʿAnmar and Ḥimyar; the northern tribes as Laḥm, Ġuḍām, Ġassān and ʿĀmila. The tradition found in Ibn Sallām’s near-contemporary Ibn al-Kalbī’s (d. 204/819) *Nasaba al-maʿadd wa-l-yaman al-kabīr* gives functionally the same list, with some variation in the ordering.

³¹⁸ For a more critical analysis of the influence of the Syriac Alexander Legend played on the formation of the Quranic narrative on Dū al-Qarnayn, see Wheeler (Wheeler 1998). A more thorough overview of how the association of Dū al-Qarnayn Alexander the Great developed during the early Islamic period see Weinfield (2008).

³¹⁹ Wheeler mentions (1) the association with the Quranic character al-Ḥiḍr, (2) the conquest of vast regions up to China, and (3) a journey through a land of darkness until the spring of life is found (Wheeler 1998:198)

Here too, South Arabian linguistic features were used to strengthen the identification of *Ḍū l-Qarnayn* with a pre-Islamic Himyarite king. The 10th century historian Hamza al-Isfahānī in fact comments on this. Interestingly, according to al-Isfahānī, the ruler that *Ḍū l-Qarnayn* was confused with is not *Ḍū Marāṭīd*, but rather *Šammār Yurʿiṣ*.

Al-Isfahānī states that this confusion arose for two reasons: firstly, because “the conquests of Alexander resembled the conquests of *Šammār Yurʿiṣ*, the recounters of tradition (*ruwātu l-ʿaḥbār*) in the time of Islam confused the two”. Secondly, he mentions that the particle *ḍū* was an “Arab word, not a Roman one” (*li-ʿanna ḍū kalima min kalām al-ʿarab lā min al-rūm*), and proceeds to give various examples of South Arabian rulers whose name contained this particle (for example, *Ḍū Nuwās*, *Ḍū Ġadan*, *Ḍū Yazan*, etcetera) (al-Isfahānī 1983:100).³²⁰

This overview of the material shows that the placement of Quranic locations in South Arabia was not necessarily present amongst the earliest exegetes. Nor was the South Arabian localization of Quranic spaces an uncontroversial process. A particular case in point is the location of Iram of the Pillars (*Iram ḍāt al-ʿimād*). Much like Sabaʿ, the early exegetes were not entirely certain as to how to interpret Iram, leaving open the possibility that it referred either to a tribe or a city (Webb 2019:118).

It was only during the 3rd to 4th century that Yemeni scholars began to propagate the notion that Iram referred to a great pre-Islamic city located in South Arabia. Its association with ʿĀd led South Arabian scholars of the 3rd/9th to 4th/10th century to cast its ruler, *Šaddād b. ʿĀd* as a pious pre-Islamic ruler. However, the ambiguity surrounding Iram was not entirely resolved, and from the 4th/10th century onwards other Muslim scholars came to reframe *Šaddād* as a tyrant and the destruction of Iram the result of divine retribution (Webb 2019:119–21).

To summarize, the Quran’s lack of specificity allowed later exegetes and scholars to fill in the gaps in its narrative. From the 3rd/9th century onwards, a Yemeni-centric tradition associating specific locales or events with South Arabia, which came to influence the broader exegetical tradition. Apparent strange terms (*ġarāʿib*) in the Quran could strengthen an ostensible connection with South Arabia, whose linguistic variation which gave the early exegetes a rich pool from which to draw, when confronted with lexical curiosities. This seems to have had the desired outcome: the term *ʿarim*, recognized as a ‘Yamani’ lexeme strengthened the Yemeni-centric tradition that placed the events mentioned in *surah sabaʿ* in South Arabia.

In some cases, positivist pro-Yemeni narratives became dominant; in others, alternative interpretations continued to exist alongside them. And in a few cases, as with *Ḍū al-Qarnayn*, elements of the South Arabian narrative were incorporated into the dominant tradition, although the identification of *Ḍū l-Qarnayn* as a Himyarite king was generally rejected.

³²⁰ *fa-lammā ʿašbaha baʿda maġāzī l-ʿiskandari baʿda maġāzī šammari yurʿiṣa fa-ġalaṭa ruwātu l-ʿaḥbāri fī ṣadri l-ʿislāmi bi-hāda l-laqaḥ*

In this regard, South Arabia's relation to the rest of Arabia, at least in linguistic terms, created an interesting kind of paradox. On the one hand, the region was considered to be the original homeland of the Arabs, who, naturally, must have spoken a perfect Arabic. At the same time, it was home to strange terms. The following section will discuss this phenomenon in more detail.

5.5. Language and linguistic identity in early Islamic South Arabia

In the previous sections, it was discussed how South Arabia became integrated into the Islamic polity relatively quickly. Furthermore, during the first few centuries of Islam, South Arabia came to be seen as the original homeland of the Arabs, it was envisioned as 'sacred space' by way of Quranic exegesis and South Arabia's pre-Islamic rulers came to be seen as exemplary representatives of pre-Islamic monotheism.

The role of language appears to have been mostly absent: South Arabians participated in the Islamic conquests and left records of their deeds. However, none of the early inscriptions discovered thus far display any linguistic features that correspond to what medieval scholars came to call 'Himyaritic'. Nor does the role of South Arabia's linguistic variation seem to have played any particular role in the scholarly debates about its place in the early Islamic world.

At the same time the other hand, early Islamic scholars were well aware of the region's linguistic particularities and the degree to which they diverged from what they considered *fushḥā*, 'pure Arabic'. The current section seeks to contextualize this paradox by looking at how South Arabia's linguistic variety impacted the way its inhabitants saw themselves.

Language is one of multiple tools with which groups create identity and a sense of belonging (Wardhaugh and Fuller 2015:74). Importantly, not only are linguistic characteristics used by members of a community to identify members of their own community, but also to potentially exclude outsiders. In late antiquity, too, language was one of several strategies of delineating social groups (Pohl and Heydemann 2013:45–47).

Early Muslim lexicographers and exegetes were interested in the Arabian Peninsula's linguistic variety from both an antiquarian and theological perspective.³²¹ During the late Umayyad caliphate, a philological tradition partially devoted to explaining more obscure terminology of the Qurʾān, prophetic sayings (*ʾaḥādīṯ*) and pre-Islamic poetry emerged. References to obscure terms, glossed as *nawādir* (singular *nādir*) "rare" or *ḡarāʾib* (singular *ḡarīb*) "strange" can already be found in early exegetical works, such as in the *tafsīr* of Ibn Muḡāhid (d. 722),

³²¹ There is the question to which degree these two can be separated. For example, al-Azmeh takes a relatively naïve perspective on Ibn al-Kalbī's "antiquarian scrupulosity" and generally takes the late Umayyad and early Abbasid antiquarians' statements at face value (al-Azmeh 2014:43) See also Webb's review (2015).

but the first work explicitly dedicated to such terms was al-Ḥalīl's *Kitāb al-ʿayn* (d. 789) (Baalbaki 2014:37–39).

In the case of South Arabia, the Muslim philologists were well aware of the region's linguistic particularities and used a variety of terms to refer to words they considered of South Arabian origins. The predominant term used was 'Ḥimyaritic' (*ḥimyarī*), although occasionally terms referring to specific South Arabian tribes could also be used. Noteworthy is the use of the term *yamanī* in al-Ḥalīl's (d. 791) *Kitāb al-ʿayn* (Elmaz 2014:29). As the publication of the *Kitāb al-ʿayn* precedes the solidification of al-Yaman as referring to a particular geographic unit, it is more likely that al-Ḥalīl's *yamanī* ought to be interpreted as 'southern' rather than Yemenite.

The medieval scholars' interest for South Arabian lexemes did not develop beyond their use to explain obscure words. As mentioned before (4.5.1; 4.5.2), knowledge of the South Arabian script was retained even beyond the collapse of South Arabian civilization and was transmitted by different scholars. However, unlike various other languages of the Middle East, such as Greek, Syriac and Middle Persian (Gutas 1998:16), a philological tradition aimed at deciphering the South Arabian languages never developed. This despite the fact that all scholarly tools were essentially available to the early Muslim scholars, which in turn raises the question as to why not. Although it is difficult to answer a negative, it is possible that the notion of a linguistic South Arabian 'other' was not compatible with the development of South Arabia as the 'Arabs' *Urheimat*.

A case in point is the usage of the term 'Ḥimyaritic'. Most references 'Ḥimyaritic' do not originate with supposed speakers of the language, but only exist in citation from members outside this supposed linguistic community.³²² Notably, citations of 'Ḥimyaritic' occurring in historical works are related to women, as in the case Wahb b. Munabbih's mother or the grave inscription of Daybaḡa bt. Nawf as well as soldiers, like the song of Yazīd's soldiers at the siege of Mecca in 72-3/691-92. In his *Ṣifat ǧazīrat al-ʿarab*, al-Hamdānī categorizes the linguistic varieties spoken in South Arabia along a qualitative spectrum, from *faṣīḥa*, 'good; proper' to *mutawassiṭa* 'middling' or *ḥulayṭa*, 'mixed' to *ʿaḡtam* "barbarous".

Rabin points out that the criteria on which al-Hamdānī based these categories are unknown, although he notes that whereas the 'mountain farmers' spoke Ḥimyaritic, the Bedouin spoke 'correct Arabic' (Rabin 1951:48). Overall, it seems the most important criterion for al-Hamdānī was a sedentary-nomadic distinction, as Robin also points out (1991e:105). To summarize, during the early Islamic period, Muslim scholars implicitly describe 'Ḥimyaritic' as a language spoken particularly by women and the lower classes.

Although this is a tempting solution to the paradox, it is also a simplistic one. An example is the length to which al-Hamdānī goes in explaining the function of *mimātion* in the South Arabian inscriptions (5.4.2.). However, this seems much

³²² It is possible, of course, that in the seventh lost volume of al-Hamdānī's *al-Iklīl*, this perspective changes. However, in his extant works, al-Hamdānī does not identify himself as a speaker of 'Ḥimyaritic.'

more reasonable when one considers the fact that al-Hamdānī sought to retroactively explain the unusual linguistic features of Himyaritic, particularly those in written form, as perfectly correct Arabic. In fact, at several points during this discussion al-Hamdānī notes that the Himyarites were Arabs themselves, referring to them as the part of ‘*arab al-‘arība*’.

Further examples that elevate the usage of Himyaritic also exist. A *ḥadīṭ* attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad has him proclaim that there is no necessity to fast while travelling while using the ‘Himyaritic’ definite article *am-* rather than the article *al-*, i.e., *laysa min am-birr am-ṣiyām fī am-safar*. An early transmission of this *ḥadīṭ* appears in the *Ġarīb al-ḥadīṭ* of Abū ‘Ubayd (d. 833). In his explanation, Abū ‘Ubayd states that the article *‘am-* is “speech of Yemen” (*luġatu l-yaman*) or “speech of Ḥimyar” (*luġatu ḥimyar*). It is possible, of course, that features of ‘Himyaritic’ were laid in the mouth of the Prophet as a way of bestowing the language with more social prestige.³²³

A second important example is that of an oft-repeated anecdote concerning the different meaning of the verb *waṭaba* in ‘Himyaritic’ and Classical Arabic (Našwān al-Ḥimyarī 1999:7065; al-Zabīdī 1965:87–88). In narrative terms, this anecdote has the following structure: an envoy from North Arabia comes to the court of a Ḥimyarite king (*malik*) and says to him: *tīb*, meaning ‘sit’ in the ‘Himyaritic’, but ‘jump’ in Classical Arabic.³²⁴ Subsequently, the king is supposed to have said ‘whoever enters Zafār must learn Ḥimyaritic’ (*man daḥala zafāri ḥammar*)³²⁵. According to some traditions, the king then states: “there is no ‘*arabiyyat* among us” (*laysat ‘indanā ‘arabiyyat*).

This tradition first appears in two 9th century works, those being the *Iṣlāḥ al-Manṭiq* of Ibn al-Sikkīt (d. c. 860) the *Ġarīb al-ḥadīṭ* of Ibn Qutayba.³²⁶ From the 4th/10th century onwards, the anecdote begins to appear in various lexicographic works, although often excluding the full anecdote, containing just the phrase *man*

³²³ A common tradition describes the Prophet as “the most eloquent of the Arabs”, e.g., al-Farrā’ (2014:10–11): “because the Prophet said: I am the most eloquent amongst you, I grew up amongst my uncles” (*li-‘anna l-nabiyya [ṣ] qāla ‘anā ‘afṣaḥu-kum naša’tu fī ‘aḥwālī*), Abū ‘Ubayd (1984:161): “Some of the Syrians told me that the Prophet said: ‘I am the most eloquent amongst the Arabs because I am from Qurayš’” (*‘anā ‘afṣaḥu l-‘arabi bi-yadi ‘anā mina l-qurayš*).

³²⁴ In most traditions this leads to the envoy’s death (al-Zabīdī: *fa-waṭaba l-‘arābīyyu fa-takassara*, “and so the ‘*arābī* jumped and was smashed”; Našwān al-Ḥimyarī *fa-daqqā ‘anqa-hū*, “and he broke his neck”) or bodily harm (al-Zabīdī: *fa-ndaqqā riġlā-hu*, “he broke both his legs”). In at least one tradition, the envoy simply jumps up, leading the ruler to repeat his command (*fa-qafāza qafzatan fa-qāla la-hū marratan ‘uḥrā [...] fa-‘aġaba l-maliku wa-qāla mā ḥādā fa-qāla tīb bi-luġati l-‘arabi ya‘nī ḥādā wa-bi-luġati ḥimyarā tīb ya‘nī q‘ud fa-qāla l-maliku ‘a-mā ‘alimta ‘anna man daḥala zafāri ḥammar*”).

³²⁵ The verb is given as *taḥammar* in Našwan al-Ḥimyarī’s *Šams al-‘ulūm*.

³²⁶ For example, Ibn al-Muṭannā’s *al-Maġma‘ at-taqāfi* also includes the saying *man daḥala zafāri ḥammar* but does not recount the anecdote (p. 933); *qawlu-hū tilādun al-tilādu mā kāna li-‘abā‘i-him qadīman qāla wa-l-ṭarīfu llaḏī ttaḥadū-hu wa-staṭarafū-hu wa-qawlu-hū zafāriyya l-ġaz‘u ya‘nī ġaz‘a zafāra wa-zafār bi-l-yamani qāla wa-fī maṭalin li-l-‘arabi man daḥala zafāri ḥammarā ya‘nī takallama bi-l-ḥimyarīyyati*.

daḥala ẓafāri ḥammar. The basic narrative elements as outlined above are present in both the accounts of Ibn Qutayba and Ibn al-Sikkīt.³²⁷

Although this anecdote has been mentioned often, both in the Islamic tradition and in western scholarship, its (historical) sociolinguistic aspects have not been discussed in much detail. Firstly, the phrase *man daḥala ẓafār ḥammar* can be read both as a warning or a boast, a reminder to visitors from outside South Arabia to, quite literally, adapt or die. Secondly, the visitor is described as a Bedouin (^ʿ*aʿrābī*) in some later traditions: for example, al-Samʿānī (d. 562/1167) cites the tradition as pertaining to “one Bedouin” (*baʿḍu l-ʿaʿrāb*). Ibn al-Sikkīt’s much earlier account refers to the visitor as “a man from amongst the Arabs” (*raḡulun min al-ʿarab*).

This juxtaposition between the ‘Himyarites’ and ‘Arabs’ also implicitly returns in al-Zabīdī’s account of the anecdote, in which the Ḥimyarite states: “inquire in the language of the Arabs” (^ʿ*uḥbir bi-luḡati l-ʿarab*). Although it is not clarified whether this event is supposed to have taken place in pre-Islamic times or after the coming of Islam, it is remarkable that Ibn al-Sikkīt’s account separates ‘Ḥimyar’ from the ‘Arabs’, a distinction that would survive into the Islamic period (Gajda 2009).

This is particularly interesting considering how South Arabia came to be identified as the Arabs’ *urheimat*, which was developed in the centuries following. It is interesting, however, that traces of this juxtaposition seems to have been retained in later traditions: in al-Samʿānī’s account, the king is told “*ʿtib* means this in the language of the ‘Arabs’ (*fa-qāla ʿtib bi-luḡati l-ʿarabi ḥādā*) (al-Samʿānī 1977:264–65). This gives the impression that, at least in linguistic terms, ‘*ḥimyar*’ and ‘*ʿarab*’ were considered distinct social entities.³²⁸

Furthermore, in Ibn al-Sikkīt’s account the Ḥimyarite king furthermore adds the phrase: “there is no *ʿarabiyyat* among us” (*laysa ʿinda-nā ʿarabiyyat* [sic]).³²⁹ This gives the impression that the term *ʿarabiyya* was understood specifically to refer to a language spoken *not* in South Arabia; the implication being that Ḥimyar, at the time, was considered an entity apart from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. A slight (but important) difference in phrasing is given in the account of Ibn Durayd, who states “our *ʿirbīt* is not like your *ʿirbūt*”:

³²⁷ Although in Ibn Qutayba’s account, the anecdote takes place on a high mountain (*ḡabal mašraf*).

³²⁸ This reminds me of the situation in the United States, where the Cajuns of southwest Louisiana continued to refer to non-French speakers as *Americains* throughout the 20th century.

³²⁹ The pronunciation of the feminine ending in pause with a *t* rather than an *h* is explicitly commented upon by al-Zabīdī, who states: “he meant *ʿarabiyya* but he pronounced the feminine *ḥāʿ* as a *tāʿ*, as is his language” (*ʿarada ʿarabiyyatun lakinna-hu waqafa ʿalā ḥāʿi l-taʿnīti bi-l-taʿi wa-ka-ḡālīka luḡatu-hū*) (al-Zabīdī 1965:87–88). Also note the particular spelling of *ʿirbīt* with an initial *kasra*.

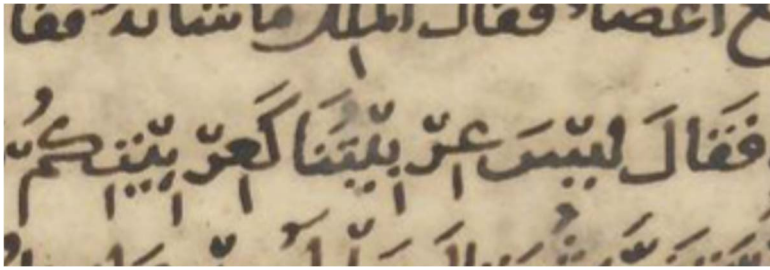


Figure 17: The phrase *laysa ʿirbītuna ka-ʿirbīti-kum* in Ibn Durayd’s *Ġamharat al-luġa* (Leiden manuscript Or. 321)

In a marginal gloss the term *ʿirbīt* [sic!] is explained to mean “language” (*luġa*), i.e., “our language is not like yours” (*al-ʿarabiyyatu l-luġatu ʿayyu laysa luġatunā ka-luġati-him*).

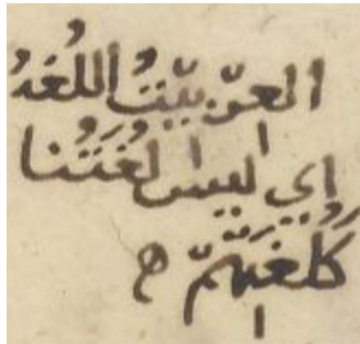


Figure 18: Marginal gloss in Ibn Durayd’s *Ġamharat al-luġa* (Leiden manuscript Or. 321)

As such, early Islamic representations of Ḥimyaritic broadly fall within two categories: Ḥimyaritic is usually spoken by groups of lower social prestige (e.g., women and footmen), although occasionally phrases of Ḥimyaritic (or at least, containing elements thereof) are found in more prestigious settings.

At the same time, as a distinct ‘Yemeni’ identity had developed that saw South Arabia as the *urheimat* of the Arabs, this led to the question as to how the region’s pre-Islamic kings fit into this image. Despite their awareness of the linguistic idiosyncrasies of ‘Ḥimyaritic’, rarely do early Muslim authors give citations of South Arabia’s pre-Islamic rulers in anything but Arabic.³³⁰ The language of the pre-Islamic inscriptions, too, was considered to have been Classical Arabic – simply written in a different script. The fact that such inscriptions were plainly visible gave early Muslim scholars ample sources supporting this view.

³³⁰ A notable exception is the “tomb inscription” of Daybāġa bt. Nawf, which appears in the tenth volume of al-Hamdāni’s *Iklīl*, which is characterized by a high amount of Ḥimyariticisms, both morphological and lexical (see also above).

However, the usage of ‘Ḥimyariticisms’ was not just limited to South Arabia’s pre-Islamic rulers: al-Hamdāni, for example, cites the Prophet as having said: “look, God has brought to me the rule of Kinda and the fortresses (*maṣānīʿ*) of Ḥimyar”. The usage of the term *maṣānīʿ* almost certainly represents a conscious use of a South Arabian term, here borrowed from South Arabian *mṣnʿt*.³³¹ In this regard, traditions containing ‘Ḥimyaritic’ elements were used as linguistic tropes, although, importantly, generally in a reverent and respectful context. However, outside these linguistic sprinkles, the core of the transmission remains good (*faṣīḥ*) Arabic. Although the Ḥimyaritic ‘signs’ remain, predominantly the use of the *musnad* script and the few lexical items, the actual *content* is Arabic.

To summarize, actual ‘Ḥimyaritic’ is generally perceived as the language of commoners, footmen, and women. While ‘Ḥimyariticisms’ occasionally occur in the speech of elevated individuals the Prophet Muḥammad, the pre-Islamic Ḥimyarite kings, it tends to be restricted to a few linguistic oddities, such as the unusual definite article *am-* or South Arabian-coded nouns, such as *qayl*, *ṭāb* or *maṣānīʿ* instead of *ʿamīr*, *ḥalla* or *ḥuṣūn*.

5.6. Conclusions

This final chapter sought to contextualize the processes of linguistic change discussed in the previous chapters within the broader social changes that occurred in early Islamic South Arabia. In chapter 4 it was shown that Arabic speakers had already been present in South Arabia for several centuries before the Islamic conquests. With South Arabia’s integration into the Islamic polity, where Arabic came to be the language of religion, administration, high culture, the integration of South Arabian Arabic speakers would seemingly naturally follow.

However, this process was far from a given. Before the Islamic period, South Arabia had been a separate region, which despite its connections to Central and North Arabia, had significant distinct cultural elements. There is little evidence that South Arabia’s inhabitants considered themselves part of the same *ethnos* as the other inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. Some evidence from the early Islamic period attests to this: South Arabia’s inclusion into the *ḡazīrat al-ʿarab* took centuries to consolidate, and several early sources indicate that South Arabia was not unambiguously considered to be a part of this region.

However, South Arabians were eventually able to not just negotiate themselves as belonging to the *ʿarab* as a people but portrayed their region as the Arabs’ original homeland. The success of this endeavor would be fortified by the dissemination of prophetic traditions confirming and exalting South Arabia and its inhabitants. The political implications of these traditions are significant in their

³³¹ The verb *ṣanaʿa* in (Classical) Arabic means ‘to produce’; whereas in Sabaic it has the sense ‘to fortify [oneself], to protect’, and is related to Gəʿəz *ṣanʿa*, “to be strong, strengthened, powerful’ (Leslau 1987:559). It is retained in Yemeni Arabic in the form *maṣnaʿ*, meaning “fortress.”

own right. The political instabilities and tensions that peaked at different moments during the Umayyad caliphate.

Before the Islamic period, South Arabia was generally considered a separate cultural region, distinct from the other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. There is no evidence that South Arabia's inhabitants referred to themselves as *'arab*, while the term *yamanī* is only attested in a two specific contexts where it likely simply meant 'southerner'. Some evidence of the exclusion of South Arabia from the *ġazīrat al-'arab* can be found in some of the earliest Islamic sources, as the people of al-Yaman are distinguished from the Arabs. Some anecdotes pertaining to the Ḥimyaritic language further suggest that these groups continued to be distinct, for some period.

At the same time, the integration of South Arabia into the Islamic polity meant that South Arabians needed to assert their identity within the new socio-political structure. Both epigraphic and documentary sources indicate the participation of South Arabians in the Islamic armies and their settlement in the conquered regions. It was in these regions, particularly in Syria, that antiquarians and scholars of South Arabian origins sought to solidify South Arabian exceptionalism by predicting the nascent return of South Arabian power, the result of divine providence.

The tangible presence of the South Arabian inscriptions further allowed medieval scholars to portray South Arabia as a sacred space. Although some knowledge of the South Arabian script and the correspondence of their glyphs to the Arabic *abġad* was retained, the medieval scholars did not develop a philological tradition to interpret the material. Instead, the inscriptions and their script (*musnad*; *zabūr*) were reimagined to tell stories of pre-Islamic South Arabian power, piety, and collapse. The casting of South Arabia as a pre-Islamic sacred space also influenced Quranic exegesis, as medieval scholars came to identify many Quranic events, characters, and locations with South Arabia.

At the same time, early Islamic South Arabia had remained as linguistically diverse as it has been before Islam. While Muslim scholars were generally aware of the region's distinctly non-Arabic features, they did not play a significant role in their debates concerning the place of South Arabia within the Islamic polity. Yet they would occasionally draw on the region's linguistic exoticism in order to explain unusual or seemingly foreign words, particularly with regards to Quranic exegesis.

Furthermore, South Arabians themselves approached the region's linguistic variety in different manners. Whereas the term 'Ḥimyaritic' was occasionally in juxtaposition to what was considered 'good Arabic', multiple traditions give the impression that the Prophet himself endorsed its usage. The pious Himyarite kings too, had left 'Ḥimyarite' inscriptions across half the world. And the statement to 'learn Ḥimyaritic before coming to Zafar' reads as much as a warning as a bold assertion of linguistic pride.

CONCLUSIONS & AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

General conclusions

This dissertation has sought to demonstrate that the linguistic evidence helps bridge the gap between the end of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods of South Arabia's history. Before the main conclusions of this dissertation are presented, it must be stressed that linguistic change can only show broad trends of social change. A more precise reconstruction of South Arabia's history must also rely on other sources to place this linguistic evidence in a broader context. Nevertheless, the general conclusions of this dissertation are as follows:

By the 4th century, South Arabia was a linguistically diverse region, where speakers of late Sabaic, Old Arabic and an Ethio-Semitic language resided together. The presence of Old Arabic speakers in South Arabia before the coming of Islam can be determined by the presence of linguistic archaisms in the dialects of South Arabia spoken today, as well as by the presence of Sabaic superstrate features in those dialects.

Similarly, the epigraphic material from the Late Sabaic period indicates the presence of an Arabic and Ethio-Semitic substrate influence. As those linguistic features that were transmitted from those languages into Late Sabaic are generally rather resistant to borrowing, their presence in Sabaic can plausibly be attributed to long-term contact. Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that some form of bi- or multilingualism existed in South Arabia during the final two centuries of the pre-Islamic period.

With the collapse of the Himyarite state in the middle of the 6th century AD, the tradition of writing monumental inscriptions ended. The main drive that led to the abandonment of the South Arabian monumental tradition was that the Sabaean-Himyaritic political tradition, with which the monumental tradition was partially associated, had lost its legitimacy after at least half a century of appropriation by competing political factions. Other factors, including climatological changes, warfare, disease, and a general political decentralization also contributed to the cessation of the South Arabian written tradition.

Between the 7th to 9th centuries, the South Arabian script continued to be used, albeit sporadically and mainly in brief texts, which were composed in Arabic. There is no written evidence of the Sabaic language surviving into the Islamic period, although it is likely that in a spoken form, it is likely to have lingered on for a few centuries after the coming of Islam. Furthermore, although South Arabian individuals are known to have participated in the early Islamic conquests, they left neither inscriptions in the South Arabian script nor in any language other than Arabic. This, too, suggests that the process of Arabization had been well under way by the late pre-Islamic period.

Early Islamic scholars, too, knew how to read the South Arabian script and were able to transcribe its glyphs with corresponding Arabic letters. A few scholars, such as the Yemeni polymath al-Hamdānī, had at least a basic understanding of the grammar of Sabaic, albeit imperfectly. A distinct philological tradition aimed

at systematically copying and translating the South Arabian inscriptions never developed.

While al-Hamdānī recognized the inscriptions' unusual linguistic features, he sought to explain their presence through the lens of Classical Arabic. The main reason for this is that during the 2nd/8th to 3rd/9th centuries, South Arabian scholars had actively participated in debates surrounding the notion of 'Arabness' and had come to argue that South Arabia was to be seen as the original homeland of the Arabs.

This process had not been self-evident: South Arabia had been a distinct cultural unit during the pre-Islamic period, and there is no evidence to suggest that its residents considered themselves to belong to the same social group with the inhabitants of central and northern Arabia. Several early traditions indicate that South Arabia's place within the "lands of the Arabs" had not been settled before the 3rd/9th century, when competing definitions still abounded. Eventually, however, South Arabia came to be considered not just an integral part of the "Island of the Arabs", but the original homeland of the Arabs.

This is also visible in the way South Arabian scholars stressed the region's exceptionalism in the case of Quranic exegesis. Over time, Quranic references to ambiguous individuals, locations and events came to be seen as referring to South Arabian people, places, and things. The fact that this was neither self-evident nor immediate can be seen by the degree of internal disagreement among the earlier exegetes, and narratives connecting Quranic passages to South Arabia's pre-Islamic history do not become dominant before the 3rd/9th century at the earliest.

Thus, early medieval South Arabian scholars were able to portray South Arabia as an Islamic sacred space. The presence of physical cultural heritage, such as pre-Islamic tombs and temples likely contributed to this, as did the region's many pre-Islamic inscriptions. The content of these inscriptions, which had been inaccessible to most people anyway, was less important than their symbolic function. The inscriptions thus turned into a trope upon which early Muslim scholars could project their own vision of South Arabia's pre-Islamic history.

Despite the many ways how early Muslim scholars came to place South Arabia in the center of a shared Arab-Muslim history, the linguistic situation on the ground remained as multifaceted as it had been in the pre-Islamic period. While recognizing this, the Muslim scholars were not able to separate the region's variants of Old Arabic that pre-dated the coming of Islam from the ancient South Arabian languages. For them, everything outside the norm of Classical Arabic was just 'Himyaritic'.

Yet the attitude towards this Himyaritic was not exclusively negative. Although such descriptions, which seemingly juxtapose 'proper Arabic' and 'Himyaritic' certainly exist, they are not the only ones. Instead, multiple traditions indicate that the Prophet Muhammad occasionally used typically Himyaritic words or phrases, which comes as close to a divine sanction as one could get. Furthermore, the unusual elements of Himyaritic also served as a source of pride: anecdotes suggesting visitors to the region to learn Himyaritic are as much a warning as an assertion of

linguistic identity. In this sense, references to the term Himyaritic in the early medieval period should be considered, first and foremost, in their social context.

Avenues for further research

In this regard, a systematic overview of the usage of the term Himyaritic in the medieval period is still lacking. Furthermore, a comparative and contrastive study with other terms referring to South Arabian lexemes in the early medieval period would also be of great use. Such a study would have added several hundred more pages to this dissertation.

Secondly, more research into the relations between the Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea would also be very welcome. Although this dissertation sought to demonstrate continued linguistic contact, additional archeological and ethnographic research would hopefully help to contextualize the linguistic processes.

Thirdly, the socio-political circumstances surrounding the collapse of the Himyarite state and the cessation of the monumental tradition also call for renewed investigations. Throughout the history of South Arabia, a distinct socio-historical trend occurs wherein peripheral groups become politically dominant. This was the case for the Himyarites, as well as with the Yazanid dynasty following the Himyarite conquest of South Arabia, and yet again with the originally suzerain kingdoms of Kinda and Maḏhīġ during the early Islamic periods. As this dissertation sought to focus on linguistic change, processes of political change and continuity remained in the background. An in-depth study of how various factions sought to assert political control during the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods would shed further light on this still poorly understood part of late antique history.

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APPENDICES

Table 1: Regular correspondences of the proto-Semitic consonant system (adapted from Weninger 2011:55)

	Late Sabaic	Modern South Arabian	Gəʿəz	Classical Arabic
*p	p	f	f	f
*b	b	b	b	b
*t	t	t	t	t
*ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ
*d	d	d	d	d
*k	k	k	k	k
*ḳ	q	ḳ	ḳ	q
*g	g	g; g/ž (Soq.)	g	ğ
*ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ
*ṭ	ṭ	ṭ; t (Soq.)	s	ṭ
*ẓ	ẓ	ẓ; t (Soq.)	š	ẓ
*ḏ	ḏ	ḏ; z (Soq.)	z	ẓ
*s ¹	s ¹	š/h; š/s~ (She.)	s	s
*š	š	š; š/š (Meh.)	š	š
*z	z	z	z	z
*s ³	s ¹	s	s	s
*s ²	s ²	ṭ	s	š
*ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ
*l	l	l	l	l
*ḥ	ḥ	ḥ; ḥ (Soq.)	ḥ	ḥ
*ḡ	ḡ	ḡ; ʿ (Soq.)	ḡ	ḡ
*ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ
*ʿ	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ
*h	h	h	h	h
*w	w	w	w	w
*m	m	m	m	m
*r	r	r	r	r
*n	n	n	n	n
*l	l	l	l	l
*y	y	y	y	y

Table 2: Independent personal pronouns

	Sabaic	MSA (Mehri)	Gəʕəz	(Classical) Arabic
3.SG.M.	<i>h[w]ʔ</i>	<i>heh</i>	<i>wəʕətu</i>	<i>huwa</i>
3.SG.F.	<i>h[y]ʔ</i>	<i>seh</i>	<i>yeʕəti</i>	<i>hiya</i>
2.SG.M.	<i>ʔ[n]t</i>	<i>hēt</i>	<i>ʕanta</i>	<i>ʕanta</i>
2.SG.F.	<i>ʔt</i>	<i>hēt</i>	<i>ʕanti</i>	<i>ʕanti</i>
1.SG.CG	<i>ʕn</i>	<i>hoh</i>	<i>ana</i>	<i>anā</i>
3.DL.M	<i>hmy</i>	<i>hī</i>	–	<i>humā</i>
3.DL.F	<i>*hmy [ʔ]</i>	–	–	<i>humā</i>
2.DL.M.	<i>*ʔ[n]tmy</i>	<i>tīLma/ətay</i>	–	<i>antumā</i>
2.DL.F.	<i>*ʔ[n]tmy</i>	–	–	<i>antumā</i>
1.DL.CG.	– (?)	<i>tī/əkəy</i>	–	–
3.PL.M.	<i>hmw</i>	<i>hēm</i>	<i>əmntu; wəʕətomu</i>	<i>hum</i>
3.PL.F.	<i>hn</i>	<i>sēm</i>	<i>əməntu; weʕəton</i>	<i>hunna; hinna</i>
2.PL.M.	<i>ʔ[n]tmw</i>	<i>(ə)tēm</i>	<i>əntəmu</i>	<i>antum</i>
2.PL.F.	– (?)	<i>(ə)tēn</i>	<i>əntən</i>	<i>antunna</i>
1.PL.CG.	?	<i>ənḥa</i>	<i>nəḥna</i>	<i>naḥnu</i>

Table 3: Clitic personal pronouns

	Sabaic	MSA (Mehri) ³³²	Gəʿəz	(Classical) Arabic
3.SG.M.	-hw	-īh; -əh	-hu	-hū/-hī ³³³
3.SG.F.	-h	-īs; -əs	-hā	-hā
2.SG.M.	-k	-ūk; -ək	-ki	-ka
2.SG.F.	-k	-ayš; -əš	-ki	-ki
1.SG.CG	-y [GEN.] -N [ACC.]	-ay; -i	-ya -ni	-[n]ī
3.DL.M	-hmy	-əhi	–	-humā
3.DL.F	-hmy	-əhi	–	-humā
2.DL.M.	-kmy	-əki	–	-kumā
2.DL.F.	-kmy	-əki	–	-kumā
1.DL.CG.	?	-əki	–	
3.PL.M.	-hmw	-īhəm; -əhəm	-homu	-hum
3.PL.F.	-hn	-īsən; -əsən	-hon	-hunna/-hinna
2.PL.M.	-kmw	-īkəm; -əkəm	-kəmu	-kum
2.PL.F.	-kn	-īkən; -əkən	-kən	-kunna
1.PL.CG.	-n	-īn; ən	-na	-nā

³³² The first set of pronominal suffixes occurs after *verbs*, the second after singular verbs. An allomorphic set of pronominal suffixes occurs after plural verbs, see also Rubin's comprehensive overview (2018:54–63)

³³³ The allomorphic form *-hī* is conditioned by the presence of the preceding vowel *-i*.

Table 4: Demonstrative pronouns

	Sabaic	MSA (Mehri)	Gəʿəz	(Classical) Arabic
PROX.SG.M	<i>d̥n</i>	<i>d̥ōm</i>	<i>zə; za</i>	<i>hādā</i>
PROX.SG.F	<i>d̥t</i>	<i>d̥īməh</i>	<i>zā</i>	<i>hādihī</i>
PROX.DL.M	<i>d̥(y)n</i>			
PROX.DL.F	[?]			
PROX.PL.M	<i>ʔln</i>	<i>lyōm</i>	<i>ʔallu</i>	<i>hāʔulāʔī</i>
PROX.PL.F	<i>ʔlt</i>	–	<i>əllā</i>	<i>hāʔulāʔī</i>
DIST.SG.M	<i>h(w)ʔ; hwt</i>	<i>d̥ēk[ə̄m]</i>	<i>zəkku</i>	<i>dālika</i>
DIST.SG.F	<i>h(y)ʔ</i>	<i>d̥īk[ə̄m]</i>	<i>ʔəntəkku</i>	<i>tilka</i>
DIST.DL.M	<i>hmy</i>			
DIST.DL.F	<i>hmt</i>			
DIST.PL.M	<i>hmw; hmt</i>	<i>lyēk[ə̄m]</i>	<i>ʔəlləkku</i>	<i>ʔulāʔika</i>
DIST.PL.F	<i>hn; nt</i>	–	–	<i>ʔulāʔika</i>

Table 5: Relative pronouns

	Sabaic	MSA (Mehri)	Gəʿəz	(Classical) Arabic
SG.M.	<i>d̥-</i>	<i>d̥a-</i>	<i>za-</i>	<i>allaḏī</i>
SG.F.	<i>d̥t-</i>	–		<i>allatī</i>
DL.M.	<i>d̥y</i>	–	–	<i>ʔallaḏānī</i>
DL.F.	<i>d̥ty</i>	–	–	<i>ʔallatānī</i>
PL.M.	<i>ʔlw/ʔly</i>	–	<i>ənta</i>	<i>allaḏīna</i>
PL.F.	<i>ʔlt</i>	–	<i>əlla</i>	<i>allatī</i>

Table 6: G-stem suffix conjugation

	Sabaic	MSA (Mehri)	Gəʕəz	(Classical) Arabic
3.SG.M	<i>qtl</i>	<i>kūsa ~ ksūh</i>	<i>nagar-a</i>	<i>qatal-a</i>
3.SG.F	<i>qtl-t</i>	<i>ks-ūt</i>	<i>nagar-at</i>	<i>qatal-at</i>
2.SG.M	<i>qtl-k</i>	<i>kis-k</i>	<i>nagara-ka</i>	<i>qatal-ta</i>
2.SG.F	<i>qtl-k</i>	<i>kis-š</i>	<i>nagar-ki</i>	<i>qatal-ti</i>
1.SG.CG	<i>qtl-k</i>	<i>kis-k</i>	<i>nagar-ku</i>	<i>qatal-tu</i>
3.DL.M.	<i>qtl-y</i>	<i>kisy-ōh</i>		<i>qatal-ā</i>
3.DL.F.	<i>qtl-tw</i> <i>qtl-ty</i>	<i>kisy-tōh</i>		<i>qatal-ā</i>
2.DL.M.	<i>qtl-kmy</i>	<i>kis-kī</i>		<i>qatal-tā</i>
2.DL.F.	–	<i>kis-kī</i>		<i>qatal-tā</i>
1.DL.CG	–	<i>kis-kī</i>		–
3.PL.M	<i>qtl-w</i>	<i>ksīw ~ kūsam</i>	<i>nagar-u</i>	<i>qatal-ū</i>
3.PL.F	<i>qtl-[n]y</i>	<i>kūsa ~ ksūh</i>	<i>nagar-ā</i>	<i>qatal-na</i>
2.PL.M	<i>qtl-kmw</i>	<i>kis-kam</i>	<i>nagar-kəmū</i>	<i>qatal-tum</i>
2.PL.F	– [?]	<i>kis-kan</i>	<i>nagar-kən</i>	<i>qatal-tunna</i>
1.PL.CG.	<i>qtl-n</i>	<i>kūs-an</i>	<i>nagar-na</i>	<i>qatal-nā</i>

Table 7: G-stem prefix conjugation (indicative mood)

	Sabaic	MSA (Mehri)	Gəʕəz	(Classical) Arabic
3.SG.M	<i>y-qtł-[n]</i>	<i>ya-wōkab</i>	<i>yə-naggər</i>	<i>ya-qtul-u</i>
3.SG.F	<i>t-qtł-[n]</i>	<i>t-wōkab</i>	<i>tə-naggər</i>	<i>ta-qtul-u</i>
2.SG.M	<i>t-qtł</i>	<i>t-wōkab</i>	<i>tə-naggər</i>	<i>ta-qtul-u</i>
2.SG.F	?	<i>t-wīkab</i>	<i>tə-naggər-i</i>	<i>ta-qtul-īna</i>
1.SG.CG	<i>(*²-qtł[n])</i>	<i>a-wōkab</i>	<i>ə-naggər</i>	<i>²a-qtul</i>
3.DL.M.	<i>y-qtł</i>	<i>ya-wakb-ōh</i>		<i>ya-qtul-ā</i>
3.DL.F.	<i>y-qtłn</i> <i>t-qtłn</i>	<i>t-wakb-ōh</i>		<i>ta-qtul-ā</i>
2.DL.M.	<i>t-qtł-nn</i>	<i>t-wakb-ōh</i>		<i>ta-qtul-ā</i>
2.DL.F.	<i>t-tql-nn</i>	–		<i>ta-qtul-ā</i>
1.DL.CG	–	<i>(n)a-wakb-ōh</i>		
3.PL.M	<i>y-qtł-w</i> <i>y-qtł-nn</i>	<i>ya-wakb-am</i>	<i>yə-naggər-u</i>	<i>ya-qtul-ūna</i>
3.PL.F	<i>y-tql-nn</i>	<i>t-wakb-an</i>	<i>yə-naggər-ā</i>	<i>ya-qtul-ūna</i>
2.PL.M	<i>t-qtł-nn</i>	<i>t-wakb-am</i>	<i>tə-naggər-u</i>	<i>ta-qtul-ūna</i>
2.PL.F	?	<i>t-wakb-an</i>	<i>tə-naggər-ā</i>	<i>ta-qtul-na</i>
1.PL.CG.	<i>(*n-qtł-[n])</i>	<i>n-wōkab</i>	<i>nə-naggər</i>	<i>na-qtul-u</i>

Table 8: Derived stems

	Sabaic	MSA (Mehri)	Gəʿəz	(Classical) Arabic
G-STEM	<i>qtl (*qatal)</i>	<i>CCōC</i>	<i>nagara</i>	<i>qatala (I)</i>
D-STEM	<i>qtl (*qattal)</i>		<i>naggara</i>	<i>qattala (II)</i>
L-STEM	–	<i>[a]CōCaC</i>	<i>nāgara</i>	<i>qātala (III)</i>
C-STEM	<i>h-qtI (*haqtal)</i>	<i>haCCūC</i>	<i>ʔangara</i>	<i>ʔaqtala (IV)</i>
CD-STEM	–	–	<i>ʔanaggara</i>	–
CL-STEM	–	–	<i>ʔanāgara</i>	–
T-STEM	<i>qtl (*i)qtatal)</i>	<i>CatCaC</i>	<i>tanaggara</i>	<i>iqtatala (VIII)</i>
GT-STEM	–	–	<i>tanag[ə]ra</i>	–
GTL-STEM	–	–	<i>tanāgara</i>	<i>taqātala (VI)</i>
GN-STEM				<i>infāʿala (VII)</i>
GTD-STEM	<i>tqtl (*taqattal)</i>	–	<i>tanaggara</i>	<i>taqattala (V)</i>
GST-STEM	<i>stqtl (*i)staqtal)</i>	<i>šaCCūC [?]</i>	<i>ʔastangara</i>	<i>istaqtala (X)</i>
DST-STEM	–	–	<i>ʔastanaggara</i>	–
LST-STEM	–	–	<i>ʔastanāgara</i>	–

Table 9: The definite article in Modern South Arabian

	Form	Example
Omani Mehri	a- ḥa-	<i>bayt</i> > <i>abayt</i> , ‘house’ <i>mōh</i> > <i>ḥamōh</i> , ‘water’
Yemeni Mehri	– ³³⁴	
Shehret	ε- a-	<i>gizirt</i> > <i>εgizirt</i> , ‘island’ <i>ʿaśər</i> > <i>aʿaśər</i> , ‘man’
Hobyot	a- ε-	<i>beyt</i> > <i>abbeyt</i> , ‘the house’ <i>lēleh</i> > <i>εlēleh</i> , ‘tonight’
Harsusi	SIMA 2002	SIMA 2002
Soqotri	– (v-) ³³⁵	<i>ə-ʔəd</i> , ‘hand’ <i>o-ʔoram</i> , ‘road’

³³⁴ Only in certain fossilized words, see Watson (2014:20)³³⁵ Only in certain fossilized words, see Kogan (Kogan 2015:478)

Table 10: Sabaic and Arabic toponyms in al-Hamdānī's *Ṣifat ǧazīrat al-ʿarab* and Yaʿqūb al-Rūmī's *Muʿǧam al-buldān*.

Unmarked (diptotic)		Definite		Indefinite	
^ʔ byn	abyān	^ʔ l̥n	al- ^ʔ aṭal	^ʔ rhqm	urhuq
^ʔ hwr	aḥwar	^ʔ hbbn	al- ^ʔ aḥbāb	ʿšmm	ʿuṣām
^ʔ ḡnt	^ʔ aḡan	^ʔ hgrn	al- ^ʔ aḡur	byḡm	bayḡ
^ʔ lhn	alhān	b ^ʔ rn	al-bār	ḡ-dmdm	wādī ḡamad
ʿbdn	ʿabadān	brn	al-barār	ḡylm	ḡayl
ʿbrn	al-ʿabrā	br ^ʔ n		ḡbs2m	ḡabaš
ʿtwd	ʿitwad	ḡnbtn	al-ḡanabāt	ḡbbm	ḡubāba
ʿdnm	ʿadan	ḡbtn	al-ḡabt	ms l wrtm	miswara
ʿs ² r	ʿašar	ḡs ² bn	al-ḡašb	mnwb[m]	manwab
ʿqrn	ʿuqrān	ḡṣfn	al-ḡuṣūf	qn ^ʔ tm	qāniya
b ^ʔ s ^ʔ n	būsān	ḡrtn	al-ḡarra	rgmtm	raḡma
brn	barrān	m ^ʿ lln	al-ma ^ʿ allal	rḡbtm	raḡāba
bn ^ʔ	banā	mqrṭn	al-maḡtara	m ^y s l rm	mayāsir
byḡn	bayhān	mḡldn	al-maḡlīd	ḡmrm	ḡamir
byn(w)n	baynūn	rḡbtn	al-raḡba	mṭrt(m)	maṭira
dtnt	daṭīna	s ^ʿ rrn	al-sarīr	n ^ʿ ṭm	nā ^ʿ iṭ
df ^ʔ	dafā	s ^ʿ fln	al-sufl	rymm	riyyām
dll	dilāl	šlln	al-šalal	s l lḡm	salīḡ
dmn	dammūn	šlyn	al-suliyy	tdmrm	tadmur
dmqt	damqūt			tbrm	ṭabīr
dhr	duhr			š ^ʿ dtm	ša ^ʿ da
ḡmr	ḡamār			ys l r(m)	yasir
ḡhr	ḡuhr			t ^ʿ rm	ta ^ʿ ār
ḡ ^ʔ zn	ḡīzān				
ḡrdn	wādī ḡirdān				
ḡyln	ḡaylān				
ḡymn	ḡaymān				
ḡnwm	ḡanwam				
ḡrbt	ḡaribāt				
ḡrn	ḡirrān				
ḡwzn	ḡawzan				
ḡyln	ḡaylān				
ḡynn	ḡaynān				
ḡḡrm(w)t	ḡadramūt				

Unmarked (diptotic)		Definite	Indefinite
<i>ḥbn</i>	<i>ḥubān</i>		
<i>ḥlb</i>	<i>ḥalb</i>		
<i>kmnhw</i>	<i>kamnā</i>		
<i>lbḥ[w]</i>	<i>lubāḥa</i>		
<i>ḥywn</i>	<i>ḥaywān</i>		
<i>ḥbn</i>	<i>ḥabbān</i>		
<i>ḥdb</i>	<i>ḥidb</i>		
<i>ḥdqn</i>	<i>ḥadaqān</i>		
<i>ḥrmt</i>	<i>ḥurmāt</i>		
<i>mr(y)b</i>	<i>maʿrib</i>		
<i>mrml</i>	<i>marmal</i>		
<i>ḥḍr</i>	<i>ḥaḍ[ū]r</i>		
<i>msʷwrtyn</i>	<i>miswaratayn</i>		
<i>msʷrqn</i>	<i>mašriqān</i>		
<i>nʷmn</i>	<i>nuʷmān</i>		
<i>nmrn</i>	<i>nimrān</i>		
<i>qtbm</i>	<i>qatabān</i>		
<i>ngrn</i>	<i>nağrān</i>		
<i>qrsʷ</i>	<i>qarīs</i>		
<i>rḥbn</i>	<i>raḥbān</i>		
<i>rdʷ</i>	<i>ridāʷ</i>		
<i>rdmn</i>	<i>radmān</i>		
<i>rmʷ</i>	<i>ramʷ</i>		
<i>rydt</i>	<i>rayda</i>		
<i>sʷlyt</i>	<i>sulayya</i>		
<i>sʷmʷn</i>	<i>sumʷān</i>		
<i>sʷyn</i>	<i>sayyān</i>		
<i>sʷyʷn</i>	<i>sayʷūn</i>		
<i>sʷbm</i>	<i>šibām</i>		
<i>sʷbwt</i>	<i>šabwa</i>		
<i>sʷmr</i>	<i>šamīr</i>		
<i>sʷyʷn</i>	<i>šayʷān</i>		
<i>sʷʳdd</i>	<i>sirdad</i>		
<i>šrwḥ</i>	<i>sirwāḥ</i>		
<i>šnʷw</i>	<i>šanʷāʷ</i>		
<i>šwʷrn</i>	<i>šawarān</i>		

Unmarked (diptotic)		Definite	Indefinite
<i>tbny</i>	<i>tuban</i>		
<i>trm</i>	<i>tarīm</i>		
<i>tn^ʿm</i>	<i>tunā^ʿim</i>		
<i>thmt</i>	<i>tihāmat</i>		
<i>tmd</i>	<i>tīmād</i>		
<i>wtyḥm</i>	<i>watyaḥ</i>		
<i>w^ʿln</i>	<i>wa^ʿāl</i>		
<i>w^ʿrn</i>	<i>wa^ʿirīn</i>		
<i>ybrn</i>	<i>yabrīn</i>		
<i>yṛb</i>	<i>yaṛib</i>		
<i>ys^ʿrn</i>	<i>yusrān</i>		
<i>ys^ʿlh</i>	<i>yasliḥ</i>		
<i>yfd</i>	<i>yafḍ</i>		
<i>ykl^ʿ</i>	<i>yaklā</i>		
<i>zfr</i>	<i>zafār</i>		
<i>zlm</i>	<i>zālim</i>		

EESTIKEELNE KOKKUVÕTE

Meie *ʿirbīt* ei ole nagu teie *ʿarabiyya!* Lingvistikulised ja sotsiopolitiilised muutused hilisantiikses Lõuna-Araabias

Käesolev doktoritöö käsitleb keelelisi ning sotsiopolitiilisi arenguid Edela-Araabias hilisantiigi perioodil (umbes aastatel 560 – 860). Doktoritöö peamine eesmärk on uurida, kuidas Lõuna-Araabia (praegune Edela-Saudi-Araabia, Jeemen ning Lääne-Omaan) keeleline olukord muutus islamieelsel ning varase islami ajastul, millest on säilinud suhteliselt vähe arheoloogilisi, dokumentaalseid ning muid allikaid.

Doktoritöö jaguneb viieks peatükiks, millele eelneb sissejuhatus, olemasolevate allikate kirjeldus, uuringute seisund ning metodoloogia. Esimene peatükk annab ajaloolise ülevaate sotsiaalsest, poliitilisest ning religioosest olukorrast Lõuna-Araabias, keskendudes aastatele 500 – 850 pKr. Teine peatükk käsitleb Lõuna-Araabia ajaloolisi keeli ning nende olulisimaid tunnuseid. Kolmas peatükk loetleb neid tunnuseid, mis on tekkinud Lõuna-Araabia keelte kontaktide kaudu teiste keeltega, eriti vaadates (1) fonoloogilisi, (2) morfoloogilisi, (3) süntaktilisi aspekte. Neljas peatükk esitab teooria, missuguses olukorras Lõuna-Araabias keelekontakt tekkis ja selle järeldusi. Viimasel peatükis arutatakse lõunaaraablaste identiteedi tekkimise tingimusi ning keele rolli selles küsimuses.

Kõige olulisemad järeldused on järgmised:

1. Sotsiopolitiilisel tasandil võib näha, et saaba-himjaari poliitiline traditsioon säilib suhteliselt pikka aega ning seda püütakse eri poliitiliste jõudude poolt omastada. Ehkki saaba-himjari traditsioon ei säili islami ajani välja, näevad varase islami Lõuna-Araabia iseseisvad dünastiad (Yu^ʿfiriidid ning Manaahhidid) end kui islamieelsete himjariitide järeltulijaid.
2. Kolmanda sajandi jooksul Lõuna-Araabiasse jõudnud monoteism mängis tõenäoliselt niinimetatud proto-islami tekkimise ajal mõjuvat rolli. See tähendab, et Lõuna-Araabias kasutatud ainujumalat kirjeldav sõnavara sarnaneb Koraanis kasutatava sõnavaraga. Epigraafilised andmed annavad mõista, et parajasti enne islami teket oli Araabia poolsaarel tekkinud teatav üldmonoteism, millel puudus konkreetne judaistlik või kristlik suundumus.
3. Keelelised andmed näitavad, et araabia keel jõudis esmalt Lõuna-Araabiasse tõenäoliselt juba sajand enne Kristuse sündi. Keeleline kontakt araabia keele ning kohalike lõunaaraabia keelte vahel sai alguse tol ajal, kuid kiirenes alates neljandast sajandist.

4. Lõuna-Araabia poliitilise ühtsuse kokkuvarisemise järele kuuendal sajandil pKr. tekkis mitmekihiline keeleline olukord, mil üksteisega olid kontaktis vähemalt kolm erinevat semiidi keelt: lõunaaraabia, vana-araabia ning etio-semiidi keeled. Suhteliselt intensiivse keelekontakti tõttu segunesid erinevad keelelised tunnused, mis puudutasid nii fonoloogiat, morfoloogiat kui ka süntaksi. Hilisemad muslimitest õpetlased ei olnud enam võimelised eristama Lõuna-Araabia keelelise mitmekülguse täpset ajalugu. Seejärel hakkasid nad seda keelt kutsuma himjaari keeleks (*himyariyya*).
5. Pärast Lõuna-Araabia integreerumist islami maailma püüdsid lõuna-araablased aktiivselt luua identiteeti, mille abil nad ühest küljest ennast kohandasid uue religiooni ning poliitilise reaalsusega kuid teisest küljest eristusid muudest muslimitest. Sel ajal tekkis 'Jeemen' (al-Yaman) konkreetse sotsiaalse ning geograafilise üksusena. Keerulisem on 'himjaari' keele küsimus selles võtmes: mõnikord tsiteeritakse 'himjaari keele' tunnuseid kõrge staatusega inimeste suus (teiste hulgas islamieelsed Lõuna-Araabia valitsejad ja ka prohvet Muhamed), kuid enamasti seostatakse himjaari keelt peamiselt madalama sotsiaalse seisundiga kõnelejatega.

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