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Reynold A. Nicholson

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CHAPTER I

SABA AND ḤIMYAR

WITH the Sabæans Arabian history in the proper sense may be said to begin, but as a preliminary step we must take account of certain races which figure more or less prominently in legend, and are considered by Moslem chroniclers to have been the original inhabitants of the country. Among these are the peoples of 'Ād and Thamūd, which are constantly held up in the Koran as terrible examples of the pride that goeth before destruction. The home of the 'Ādites was in Ḥaḍramawt, the province adjoining Yemen, on the borders of the desert named *Aḥqāfu 'l-Raml*. It is doubtful whether they were Semites, possibly of Aramaic descent, who were subdued and exterminated by invaders from the north, or, as Hommel maintains,¹ the representatives of an imposing non-Semitic culture which survives in the tradition of 'Many-columned Iram,'² the Earthly Paradise built by Shaddād, one of their kings. The story of their destruction is related as follows:³ They were a people of gigantic strength and stature, worshipping idols and committing all

¹ *Die Namen der Säugethiere bei den Südsemitischen Völkern*, p. 343 seq.

² *Iramu Dhātu 'l-Imād* (Koran, lxxxix, 6). The sense of these words is much disputed. See especially Ṭabarī's explanation in his great commentary on the Koran (O. Loth in *Z.D.M.G.*, vol. 35, p. 626 sqq.).

³ I have abridged Ṭabarī, *Annals*, i, 231 sqq. Cf. also chapters vii, xi, xxvi, and xlvi of the Koran.

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manner of wrong ; and when God sent to them a prophet, Húd by name, who should warn them to repent, they answered : “ O Húd, thou hast brought us no evidence, and we will not abandon our gods for thy saying, nor will we believe in thee. We say one of our gods hath afflicted thee with madness.”¹ Then a fearful drought fell upon the land of ‘Ád, so that they sent a number of their chief men to Mecca to pray for rain. On arriving at Mecca the envoys were hospitably received by the Amalekite prince, Mu‘áwiya b. Bakr, who entertained them with wine and music—for he had two famous singing-girls known as *al-Jarádatán* ; which induced them to neglect their mission for the space of a whole month. At last, however, they got to business, and their spokesman had scarce finished his prayer when three clouds appeared, of different colours—white, red, and black—and a voice cried from heaven, “ Choose for thyself and for thy people ! ” He chose the black cloud, deeming that it had the greatest store of rain, whereupon the voice chanted—

“ Thou hast chosen embers dun | that will spare of ‘Ad not one |
that will leave nor father nor son | ere him to death they shall have
done.”

Then God drove the cloud until it stood over the land of ‘Ád, and there issued from it a roaring wind that consumed the whole people except a few who had taken the prophet’s warning to heart and had renounced idolatry.

From these, in course of time, a new people arose, who are called ‘the second ‘Ád.’ They had their settlements in Yemen, in the region of Saba. The building of the great Dyke of Ma’rib is commonly attributed to their king, Luqmán b. ‘Ád, about whom many fables are told. He was surnamed ‘The Man of the Vultures’ (*Dhu ’l-Nusúr*), because it had been granted to him that he should live as long as seven vultures, one after the other.

¹ Kóran, xi, 56–57.

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THE LEGEND OF 'AD AND THAMÚD 3

In North Arabia, between the Hijáz and Syria, dwelt the kindred race of Thamúd, described in the Koran (vii, 72) as inhabiting houses which they cut for themselves in the rocks. Evidently Muḥammad did not know the true nature of the hewn chambers which are still to be seen at Hġjr (Madá'in Šálih), a week's journey northward from Medína, and which are proved by the Nabaṭæan inscriptions engraved on them to have been sepulchral monuments.¹ Thamúd sinned in the same way as 'Ád, and suffered a like fate. They scouted the prophet Šálih, refusing to believe in him unless he should work a miracle. Šálih then caused a she-camel big with young to come forth from a rock, and bade them do her no hurt, but one of the miscreants, Qudár the Red (al-Aḥmar), hamstrung and killed her. "Whereupon a great earthquake overtook them with a noise of thunder, and in the morning they lay dead in their houses, flat upon their breasts."² The author of this catastrophe became a byword: Arabs say, "More unlucky than the hamstringer of the she-camel," or "than Aḥmar of Thamúd." It should be pointed out that, unlike the 'Ádites, of whom we find no trace in historical times, the Thamúdités are mentioned as still existing by Diodorus Siculus and Ptolemy; and they survived down to the fifth century A.D. in the corps of *equites Thamudeni* attached to the army of the Byzantine emperors.

Besides 'Ád and Thamúd, the list of primitive races includes the 'Amáliq (Amalekites)—a purely fictitious term under which the Moslem antiquaries lumped together several peoples of an age long past, *e.g.*, the Canaanites and the Philistines. We hear of Amalekite settlements in the Tiháma (Netherland) of Mecca and in other parts of the peninsula. Finally, mention should

¹ See Doughty's *Documents Epigraphiques recueillis dans le nord de l'Arabie*, p. 12 sqq.

² Koran, vii, 76.

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be made of Ṭasm and Jadís, sister tribes of which nothing is recorded except the fact of their destruction and the events that brought it about. The legendary narrative in which these are embodied has some archæological interest as showing the existence in early Arabian society of a barbarous feudal custom, 'le droit du seigneur,' but it is time to pass on to the main subject of this chapter.

Ṭasm and Jadía.

The Pre-islamic history of the Yoqtánids, or Southern Arabs, on which we now enter, is virtually the history of two peoples, the Sabæans and the Ḥimyarites, who formed the successive heads of a South Arabian empire extending from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf.

History of the Yoqtánids.

Saba¹ (Sheba of the Old Testament) is often incorrectly used to denote the whole of Arabia Felix, whereas it was only one, though doubtless the first in power and importance, of several kingdoms, the names and capitals of which are set down in the works of Greek and Roman geographers. However exaggerated may be the glowing accounts that we find there of Sabæan wealth and magnificence, it is certain that Saba was a flourishing commercial state many centuries before the birth of Christ.² "Sea-traffic between the ports of East Arabia and India was very early established, and Indian products, especially spices and rare animals (apes and peacocks) were conveyed to the coast of 'Umán. Thence, apparently even in the tenth century B.C., they went overland to the Arabian Gulf, where they

The Sabæans.

¹ Properly Saba' with *hamza*, both syllables being short.

² The oldest record of Saba to which a date can be assigned is found in the Assyrian cuneiform inscriptions. We read in the Annals of King Sargon (715 B.C.), "I received the tribute of Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, of Shamsiyya, the Queen of Arabia, of Ithamara the Sabæan—gold, spices, slaves, horses, and camels." Ithamara is identical with Yatha'amar, a name borne by several kings of Saba.

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were shipped to Egypt for the use of the Pharaohs and grandees. . . . The difficulty of navigating the Red Sea caused the land route to be preferred for the traffic between Yemen and Syria. From Shabwat (Sabota) in Ḥaḍramawt the caravan road went to Ma'rib (Mariaba), the Sabæan capital, then northward to Macoraba (the later Mecca), and by way of Petra to Gaza on the Mediterranean."¹ The prosperity of the Sabæans lasted until the Indian trade, instead of going overland, began to go by sea along the coast of Ḥaḍramawt and through the straits of Báb al-Mandab. In consequence of this change, which seems to have taken place in the first century A.D., their power gradually declined, a great part of the population was forced to seek new homes in the north, their cities became desolate, and their massive aqueducts crumbled to pieces. We shall see presently that Arabian legend has crystallised the results of a long period of decay into a single fact—the bursting of the Dyke of Ma'rib.

The disappearance of the Sabæans left the way open for a younger branch of the same stock, namely, the Ḥimyarites, or, as they are called by classical authors, The Ḥimyarites. Homeritæ, whose country lay between Saba and the sea. Under their kings, known as Tubba's, they soon became the dominant power in South Arabia and exercised sway, at least ostensibly, over the northern tribes down to the end of the fifth century A.D., when the latter revolted and, led by Kulayb b. Rabī'a, shook off the suzerainty of Yemen in a great battle at Khazázá.² The Ḥimyarites never flourished like the Sabæans. Their maritime situation exposed them more to attack, while the depopulation of the country had seriously weakened their military strength. The Abyssinians—originally colonists from Yemen—made repeated attempts to gain a

¹ A. Müller, *Der Islam im Morgen und Abendland*, vol. i, p. 24 seq.

² Nöldeke, however, declares the traditions which represent Kulayb as leading the Rabī'a clans to battle against the combined strength of Yemen to be entirely unhistorical (*Fünf Mo'allaqât*, i, 44).

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foothold, and frequently managed to instal governors who were in turn expelled by native princes. Of these Abyssinian viceroys the most famous is Abraha, whose unfortunate expedition against Mecca will be related in due course. Ultimately the Ḥimyarite Empire was reduced to a Persian dependency. It had ceased to exist as a political power about a hundred years before the rise of Islam.

The chief Arabian sources of information concerning Saba and Ḥimyar are (1) the so-called 'Ḥimyarite' inscriptions, and (2) the traditions, almost entirely of a legendary kind, which are preserved in Muḥammadan literature.

Sources of
information.

Although the South Arabic language may have maintained itself sporadically in certain remote districts down to the Prophet's time or even later, it had long ago been superseded as a medium of daily intercourse by the language of the North, the Arabic *par excellence*, which henceforth reigns without a rival throughout the peninsula. The dead language, however, did not wholly perish. Already in the sixth century A.D. the Bedouin rider made his camel kneel down while he stopped to gaze wonderingly at inscriptions in a strange character engraved on walls of rock or fragments of hewn stone, and compared the mysterious, half-obliterated markings to the almost unrecognisable traces of the camping-ground which for him was fraught with tender memories. These inscriptions are often mentioned by Muḥammadan authors, who included them in the term *Musnad*. That some Moslems—probably very few—could not only read the South Arabic alphabet, but were also acquainted with the elementary rules of orthography, appears from a passage in the eighth book of Hamdānī's *Iklil*; but though they might decipher proper names and make out the sense of words here and there, they had no real knowledge of the language. How the inscriptions were discovered anew by the enterprise of European travellers,

The South
Arabic or
Sabaean
inscriptions.

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gradually deciphered and interpreted until they became capable of serving as a basis for historical research, and what results the study of them has produced, this I shall now set forth as briefly as possible. Before doing so it is necessary to explain why instead of 'Ĥimyarite inscriptions' and 'Ĥimyarite language' I have adopted the less familiar designations 'South Arabic' or 'Sabæan.' 'Ĥimyarite' is equally misleading, whether applied to the language of the inscriptions or to the inscriptions themselves. As regards the language, it was spoken in one form or another not by the Ĥimyarites alone, but also by the Sabæans, the Minæans, and all the different peoples of Yemen.

Objections to
the term
'Ĥimyarite.'

Muḥammadans gave the name of 'Ĥimyarite' to the ancient language of Yemen for the simple reason that the Ĥimyarites were the most powerful race in that country during the last centuries preceding Islam. Had all the inscriptions belonged to the period of Ĥimyarite supremacy, they might with some justice have been named after the ruling people; but the fact is that many date from a far earlier age, some going back to the eighth century B.C., perhaps nearly a thousand years before the Ĥimyarite Empire was established. The term 'Sabæan' is less open to objection, for it may fairly be regarded as a national rather than a political denomination. On the whole, however, I prefer 'South Arabic' to either.

Among the pioneers of exploration in Yemen the first to interest himself in the discovery of inscriptions was Carsten Niebuhr, whose *Beschreibung von Arabien*, published in 1772, conveyed to Europe the report that inscriptions which, though he had not seen them, he conjectured to be 'Ĥimyarite,' existed in the ruins of the once famous city of Zafâr. On one occasion a Dutchman who had turned Muḥammadan showed him the copy of an inscription in a completely unknown alphabet, but "at that time (he says) being very ill with a violent fever, I had more reason to prepare myself for death

Discovery and
decipherment
of the South
Arabic
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than to collect old inscriptions.”¹ Thus the opportunity was lost, but curiosity had been awakened, and in 1810 Ulrich Jasper Seetzen discovered and copied several inscriptions in the neighbourhood of *Zafár*. Unfortunately these copies, which had to be made hastily, were very inexact. He also purchased an inscription, which he took away with him and copied at leisure, but his ignorance of the character led him to mistake the depressions in the stone for letters, so that the conclusions he came to were naturally of no value.² The first serviceable copies of South Arabic inscriptions were brought to Europe by English officers employed on the survey of the southern and western coasts of Arabia. Lieutenant J. R. Wellsted published the inscriptions of *Ḥiṣn Ghuráb* and *Naqb al-Ḥajar* in his *Travels in Arabia* (1838).

Meanwhile Emil Rödiger, Professor of Oriental Languages at Halle, with the help of two manuscripts of the Berlin Royal Library containing ‘*Himyarite*’ alphabets, took the first step towards a correct decipherment by refuting the idea, for which De Sacy’s authority had gained general acceptance, that the South Arabic script ran from left to right³; he showed, moreover, that the end of every word was marked by a straight perpendicular line.⁴ Wellsted’s inscriptions, together with those which Hulton and Cruttenden brought to light at *Ṣan‘á*, were deciphered by Gesenius and Rödiger working independently (1841). Hitherto England and Germany had shared the

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 94 seq. An excellent account of the progress made in discovering and deciphering the South Arabic inscriptions down to the year 1841 is given by Rödiger, *Excurs ueber himjaritische Inschriften*, in his German translation of Wellsted’s *Travels in Arabia*, vol. ii, p. 368 sqq.

² Seetzen’s inscriptions were published in *Fundgruben des Orients*, vol. ii (Vienna, 1811), p. 282 sqq. The one mentioned above was afterwards deciphered and explained by Mordtmann in the *Z.D.M.G.*, vol. 31, p. 89 seq.

³ The oldest inscriptions, however, run from left to right and from right to left alternately (*βαστροποηδών*).

⁴ *Notiz ueber die himjaritische Schrift nebst doppeltem Alphabet derselben* in *Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, vol. i (Göttingen, 1837), p. 332 sqq.

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credit of discovery, but a few years later France joined hands with them and was soon leading the way with characteristic brilliance. In 1843 Th. Arnaud, starting from Ṣanʿá, succeeded in discovering the ruins of Maʿrib, the ancient Sabæan metropolis, and in copying at the risk of his life between fifty and sixty inscriptions, which were afterwards published in the *Journal Asiatique* and found an able interpreter in Osiander.¹ Still more important were the results of the expedition undertaken in 1870 by the Jewish scholar, Joseph Halévy, who penetrated into the Jawf, or country lying east of Ṣanʿá, which no European had traversed before him since 24 B.C., when Ælius Gallus led a Roman army by the same route. After enduring great fatigues and meeting with many perilous adventures, Halévy brought back copies of nearly seven hundred inscriptions.² During the last twenty-five years much fresh material has been collected by E. Glaser and Julius Euting, while study of that already existing by Prætorius, Halévy, D. H. Müller, Mordtmann, and other scholars has substantially enlarged our knowledge of the language, history, and religion of South Arabia in the Pre-islamic age.

Neither the names of the Himyarite monarchs, as they appear in the lists drawn up by Muḥammadan historians, nor the order in which these names are arranged can pretend to accuracy. If they are historical persons at all they must have reigned in fairly recent times, perhaps a short while before the rise of Islam, and probably they were unimportant princes whom the legend has thrown back into the ancient epoch, and has invested with heroic attributes. Any one who doubts this has only to compare the modern lists with those which have been made from the material in the inscriptions.³ D. H.

¹ See Arnaud's *Relation d'un voyage à Mareb (Saba) dans l'Arabie méridionale* in the *Journal Asiatique*, 4th series, vol. v (1845), p. 211 sqq. and p. 309 sqq.

² See *Rapport sur une mission archéologique dans le Yémen* in the *Journal Asiatique*, 6th series, vol. xix (1872), pp. 5-98, 129-266, 489-547.

³ See D. H. Müller, *Die Burgen und Schlösser Südarabiens* in *S.B.W.A.*, vol. 97, p. 981 sqq.

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Müller has collected the names of thirty-three Minæan kings. Certain names are often repeated—a proof of the existence of ruling dynasties—and ornamental epithets are usually attached to them. Thus we find Dhamar-^{The historical value of the inscriptions.}‘alī Dhirrīḥ (Glorious), Yatha‘amar Bayyin (Distinguished), Kariba‘l Watār Yuhan‘im (Great, Beneficent), Samah‘alī Yanūf (Exalted). Moreover, the kings bear different titles corresponding to three distinct periods of South Arabian history, viz., ‘Priest-king of Saba’ (*Mukarrib Saba*),¹ ‘King of Saba’ (*Malk Saba*), and ‘King of Saba and Raydān.’ In this way it is possible to determine approximately the age of the various buildings and inscriptions, and to show that they do not belong, as had hitherto been generally supposed, to the time of Christ, but that in some cases they are at least eight hundred years older.

How widely the peaceful, commerce-loving people of Saba and Ḥimyar differed in character from the wild Arabs to whom Muḥammad was sent appears most strikingly in their submissive attitude towards their gods, which forms, as Goldziher has remarked, the key-^{Votive inscriptions.}note of the South Arabian monuments.² The prince erects a thank-offering to the gods who gave him victory over his enemies; the priest dedicates his children and all his possessions; the warrior who has been blessed with “due man-slayings,” or booty, or escape from death records his gratitude, and piously hopes for a continuance of favour. The dead are conceived as living happily under divine protection; they are venerated and sometimes deified.³ The following inscription,

¹ The title *Mukarrib* combines the significations of prince and priest.

² Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, Part I, p. 3.

³ See F. Prætorius, *Unsterblichkeitsglaube und Heiligenverehrung bei den Himyaren* in *Z.D.M.G.*, vol. 27, p. 645. Hubert Grimme has given an interesting sketch of the religious ideas and customs of the Southern Arabs in *Weltgeschichte in Charakterbildern: Mohammed* (Munich, 1904), p. 29 sqq.