

QUADERNI DI ARABIA ANTICA 7

Daniele Mascitelli

ARABI
Arabs Recount Arabia Before Islam
Part III

«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER

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ARABI. Arabs Recount Arabia Before Islam, Part III

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Foreseeing the Prophecy

Monotheism vs. Paganism

Between the 3rd and the 9th century CE almost the whole of Europe, Northern Africa and Western Asia moved from a polytheistic creed (or rather a pagan complex of credences) towards a monotheistic faith. This shift caused a huge change in all levels of human expressions: from daily life to architecture, from common ethics to philosophical systems, from forms of political and legal organization to the creation of new geo-strategic spheres of influence. Modern and contemporary world is still marked by, and undergoes many consequences of those changes.¹

Obviously, such a shift cannot have been the same in all the countries included in such a wide area, leaving aside the six hundred years (or more) it took to be completed. At the same time the quality and the depth of such a conversion is hard to determine in all the single societies involved in the process, and the different forms of monotheism that emerged in those times each have their own characteristics. Moreover this process appears to have been as sudden somewhere as it was gradual somewhere else, so that it could not be immune to progressive forms of inclusiveness which embodied preceding thoughts and traditions inside its new system.

Yet the *narrative* about the first stages of this conversion (quite often set up from the inside of the new system) shares patterns common to so many of the cases documented – sometimes hardly documented – even in apparently peripheral regions as Arabia was before 7th century. By chance, Arabia happened to have experienced that same process twice in a few hundred year time frame: first in the passage from paganism to both Christian and Jewish monotheism (5th-6th century), then toward Islamic monotheism (7th-8th century). In both cases the narrative has been built on a polytheism-monotheism opposition base.

Thus this double process that occurred in Arabia gives us the possibility to look through it in order to seek the substance of what the “Great Conversion Movement” cancelled or simply censored: the voice of the Arabian paganism that was going to be defeated though its traces were going to survive under a new guise.

The ignorance of “ignorance”

The Egyptian writer Yūsuf Zīdān (Youssef Ziedan) set the plot of his historical novel *al-Nabaṭī* in a unique scenario: following the fates of a Copt girl married to an Arab-Nabataean merchant, he takes us into the area between the Nile Delta and Jordan (Petra valley) during the crucial

¹ G. Fowden has recently (FOWDEN 2014) started a debate on reconsidering the historical concepts of [Late] Antiquity and Middle Age in favour of a “First Millennium” unitarian idea qualified by the advent of monotheism.

decade 628-638 CE, thus giving us a singular picture of a pre-Islamic world which was going to fade out and turn into a new Islamic one. Emphasis is given to the religious issue: within the family of the saga indeed we meet a Jew (or a hopeful one), a very warm Christian of unspecified confession (possibly monophysite), a pagan devotee to the goddess Allāt, some skeptic characters not interested in theological questions, but believing in “animistic” *jinn*s, and finally a “going-to-be prophet” professing a curious sort of dy-theism in which the goddess Allāt is dialectical with her god-son El.²

As is implicit in the modern definition of “novel”, this picture is fictional, although the author’s clarity as a philologist allows us to suppose he was inspired by “historical” sources.

We introduced the first part of these studies (*ARABI I*) remarking that at the beginnings of Arab-Muslim historiography “story-telling” was inseparable from “history-telling”. We can see here a connection with the story-telling of the modern “historical novel”: today historical details make the likeliness of fictive narration stronger, while in classical Arab Muslim historiography the truthfulness of the history (sometimes) relied on the authority of the likeliness of fictive narrative. Or, to be more precise: for a time historiographers used to check historical and fictive news (*aḥbār*), while attributing to the more fantastic ones the seal of “legend” (*uṣṭūr*), but then they used to record them anyway (I would say fortunately) suspending the opinion on them with the formula «God knows best» (*Allāhu a‘lam*).

However a problem arises from this assumption: given that the historical data used today in fiction is already filled with fictive material, especially when dealing with religious questions, what is true history?

In other words: what did Arab Muslim writers of the first centuries after Hiġra really know about pre-Islamic religion and what did they ignore, willingly or not, about their “Age of Ignorance” (*ġāhiliyya*)? Did they intentionally delete any compromising (i. e. anti-Islamic) detail in sources they were collecting and compiling? Or did those same sources omit, or simply disregard substantial reference to a pre-Islamic religion? And why did they act that way for some sources but preserved other sources? Thus what can we deduce from those sources? And finally what do we really know or ignore about the religion in Arabia of that same age?

These questions are the starting point for this brief and critical survey of some Arab accounts of the religious life in Arabia before the coming of Islam. In comparing them to external sources (archaeology, epigraphy, historiography), we will find a kind of congruence with what Arab-Muslim Tradition tells us about paganism in pre-Islamic Arabia, at least in the last century before Hiġra, but the overall impression is that many details are lost or simply approximate in both kinds of sources.

Sieving orthodox opinions and archaeological evidence: the sacred space

It seems that Arabian pagans never felt the need to give an account of themselves extensively. Thus, given that history written by winners, Arabian paganism must have been narrated only by winning monotheists.

² ZIEDAN 2010.

Arabian paganism, as depicted in Muslim sources, appears indeed to be very poor and confined to meaningless, if not criminal, rituals of idolatry and bare practices of soothsaying – this is not so impacting since the aim of those same sources was to scorn that “ignorance” (*ḡāhiliyya*), i.e. superstition, of non-Muslims. One needs to sift through a great mass of these sources to get only some meagre grain of genuine information about pre-Islamic religion. And such information seemingly goes not further back than some hundred years before the *hiḡra*.

A schematic draft of the Muslim vision on Arabian religion runs as follows: the founder of Meccan sanctuary, in the name of the only God – as stated in the Koran XIV 35-37 and II 125 – was Ibrāhīm (Abraham) who thus installed a proto-monotheistic cult in the centre of Arabia. Only corruption of later Arab tribesmen turned the Sacred House and the whole *ḥaram* into a polytheistic shrine. Tradition records the names of the corrupted as well as those who persisted in monotheism. Here is how Ibn al-Kalbī summarized the issue in his *Kitāb al-aṣnām*:

The reason which led them [= the children of Isma‘īl son of Ibrāhīm (Ishmael son of Abraham), i.e. the Arabs] to the worship of images and stones was the following: no one used to leave Mecca [after the pilgrimage] without carrying away with him a stone from the stones of the Sacred House (*al-ḥaram*) as a token of reverence to it, and as a sign of deep affection to Mecca. Wherever he settled he would erect that stone and circumambulate it in the same manner he used to circumambulate the Ka‘bah [before his departure from Mecca], seeking thereby its blessing and affirming his deep affection for the Sacred House. In fact, the Arabs still venerate the Ka‘ba and Mecca and journey to them in order to perform the pilgrimage and visitation, conforming thereby to the time honored custom which they inherited from Ibrāhīm and Isma‘īl. In time this led them to the worship of whatever took their fancy, and caused them to forget their former worship. They exchanged the religion of Ibrāhīm and Isma‘īl for another. Consequently they took to the worship of images, becoming like the nations before them. They sought and determined what the people of Nūḥ (Noah) had worshiped of these images and adopted the worship of those which were still remembered among them. Among these devotional practices were some which came down from the time of Ibrāhīm and Isma‘īl, such as the veneration of the House and its circumambulation, the pilgrimage, the visitation (*al-‘umra*), the vigil (*al-wuqūf*) on ‘Arafā and al-Muzdalifa, sacrificing she-camels, raising acclamation of the name of the deity (*tahlīl*) and the visitation, introducing there into belonging to it.³

Actually this account just gives an explanation of a multiplication of (illegitimate) shrines and the consequent practice of idolatry (or litholatry). Subsequently Ibn al-Kalbī gives indeed a list of no less than 22 names of deities to which Arabian tribes dedicated to their own sanctuaries and whom used to worship in their seasonal pilgrimages.⁴ It is not clearly explained whether

³ *AṢNĀM*, p. 6 of the 2nd edition, Cairo; he quotes his father as his source; similar accounts may be found in the *Sīra* (pp. 35-37 of English translation) and, in general, in the earliest works on the subject. Many remarks may be carried on this passage; here we only stress that “the worship of images and stones” and a journey “in order to perform the pilgrimage and visitation” are considered customs of pre-Islamic Arabs and assumed as main features of paganism, or at least as a corrupted phenomenon of monotheism.

⁴ YA‘QUBĪ (*TA‘RĪḤ*, I, pp. 294-299) gives a more complete picture of religiousness in pre-Islamic Arabia, including Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism in the list of religions of the Arabs (on this see further); Michael

these deities were worshiped by a single tribe as its own god, or their cult was shared by many of the Arabs, if not all of them. Neither are we informed about any theological feature of the deities and their personality, nor why they were worshiped: had each one of them got a specific power on one sphere of earthly life or was he an all-purpose almighty god?

An important fact we derive from this story is that a pilgrimage to a sanctuary – either a *ḥaḡḡ* or *‘umra* or *ziyāra* or a vigil (*wuqūf*) in a high open space, together with sacrifices and subsequent feasts and acclamations to deity (*tahlīl* and *talbiyya*) – was perceived as a main feature of pagan religion since it could be reproduced almost everywhere – and this last is a further blame Muslims accuse pagans of doing. Crediting Abraham as the founder of rites performed by idolaters is an implicit admission of the pagan quality of those rites themselves, since those rites were performed also by pagans before the Revelation. Western scholars of Islam (Snouk Hurgronje, Noeldeke, Wellhausen, Robertson Smith, Lammens, etc.) have often seen this as an intentional conceding by Muḥammad to the Meccan élite – the Qurayš who, being charged with temple services of feeding and watering (*rifāda* and *saqāya*) pilgrims, might be seen as tenders of the sanctuary, if not its “priests” – in order to gain their support; a conceding that allowed those so important rites to be preserved into Islam among its primary devotional acts (*‘ibādāt*). But this may be a restricted vision of the issue, as we will see further on.

Based on the above the pilgrimage and the rites concerned with it may be assumed to be a basic feature of pre-Islamic religion, widespread throughout Arabia among many Arabian tribes – at least at the time of Muḥammad. Actually the central point of Arabian paganism is presumed to be the place of worship, i. e. the place inhabited by the divinity, his “house” (*bayt*). It seems also to be the classifying factor in Ibn al-Kalbī’s catalogue: that is indeed not only a list of gods, but also a list of sacred places since he puts in it also, for instance, al-Qalīs in Ṣan‘ā’ – which is nothing else but the church built by the Christian Abyssinian ruler of Yemen Abraha – and Ri’am – which is the name of a temple north of Ṣan‘ā’ dedicated to the South Arabian deity Ṭa’lab.

In order to get some hints from the archaeology and epigraphy of sacred places in ancient Arabia, two sites here will be sampled as the extremes of how a sacred space might be conceived in Arabia.

One is the gorge of al-‘Uḏayb (Ġabal ‘Ikmaḥ) some kilometers north of ancient Dedan – today al-‘Ulā in Saudi Arabia. On the surface of the rock face of the gorge many inscriptions have been carved in Dedanitic monumental script.⁵ All of them are referred to a singular rite named *zll* performed in the name of the god D-Ġbt in order to grant prosperity to inscriber’s estates, especially palm-groves, fields, herds and in some case his sowing. Sometimes the rite is performed by a male or female official (*s’lḥ* or *s’lḥt*)⁶ who acts on account of him/herself or other people.

Lecker (see in particular 1995b and *forthcoming*) thoroughly analysed this and other more extended lists of idols worshiped by single Arab tribes, found in several sources.

⁵ Note that some of them are graffito, while some other are bass-relief carving. The corpus of these inscriptions is available at the OCIANA (Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia) section of DASI (<http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=42&prjId=4&corId=50&collId=0&navId=0&rl=yes>); the total of inscriptions from that site overpasses 60 texts. See also FAREÈS-DRAPPEAU 2005, in particular pp. 92-94.

⁶ Literally “herald”, if related to Aramaic *šeliḥ*, likely a priest or priestess; but maybe an “armed man/woman” if we look at a more Arabic etymology.

The religious context of this rite is undoubted, but the god invoked, 𐤓-Ġbt, is only attested in Dedanitic inscriptions and not mentioned in external sources, thus we know very little about his traits. The name may mean “the One of the Grove” or “the Lord of the Grove” thus he could easily be considered to be the protector deity of the whole Dedan oasis and particularly of its green areas and fields. We do not know how long this rite lasted in time in that place; despite the abundance of inscriptions in such a narrow space, the names of subscribers and their provenance are few and not recurrent: very few of them repeated the rite, most of them performed it only once. This suggests that the *zll* rite did not have a long history in that form within the Dedan religion, and this seems to be confirmed by the general homogeneity of the script used in those inscriptions. At the moment no archaeological remains of a temple structure have been found related to this site and rite.

To sum up, we can only lay down speculative hypotheses about what the actual religious meaning of the *zll* rite was and how it was performed: it likely took place seasonally before the sowing time; it gathered people from all around the oasis, mainly land-owners and occasionally herders, possibly leaving not far from that; it could be performed as a one-day and one-night journey to a mountain or glade with the aim of testifying to the deity the presence of his devotees or answering the deity’s call – in the form of the Muslim vigil at ‘Arafā and Muzadalifa – but this is a hard speculation. What is to be remarked, in my view, is the quality of inscriptions attesting the performance of the rite: they are not hastily inscribed graffiti; most of them are carefully carved in a not easily reachable position on the slope of the gorge, and likely required professional stonemasons to be written in that way, a valuable expense for those times. The inscriptions themselves may be read as a sort of invoice certifying the performance of the rite; in this case we know what the god gave: “protection” – as the term *zll* (literally “shade”) suggests, and I would add “insurance”, with a little shift of meaning. But we can only figure what the inscribers offered to get that: possibly a tithe of their incomes; those who managed such incomes (likely the *s’lh*), and how they did it, is not explicit.

At the other extreme there is the Awam (ʿwm, possibly to be read ʿawām = “asylum”?) temple in Maʿrib, Yemen: it is probably the largest and most architecturally structured sacred place of pre-Islamic Arabia, and though its eight pillars were known since the Middle Ages by the nickname *Maḥram Bilqis* (“the sanctuary of Bilqis”), only recent archaeological investigations evidenced how complex it was. It is placed outside the city on the right side of the watercourse flowing from the dam. The whole area of the sanctuary includes several buildings annexed to the main temple, introduced by an eight squared-pillared (or monoliths) propylaeum, and backed by a large oval temenos and a cemetery, for a total surface of ca. 15,000 squared meters.⁷

The temple was dedicated to (i. e. inhabited by) the god ʿlmqh (Ilmuqah, but several alternative readings are possible) the patron god of Saba’ community, and it has been in use at least from the 7th century BCE to the mid 4th century CE,⁸ but its history reveals many modifications and expansions in its structure and decorations. The temple was able to offer a wide range of religious services: purification rites, animal sacrifice, huge gatherings for pilgrimages or festi-

⁷ See MARAQTEN 2015.

⁸ The inscriptions in which its name occurs cover almost the whole extension of South Arabian epigraphy, until 461 HE=351 CE (MQ-Maʿrib 1).

vals, oracles (*gwb*)⁹ and funerals, too, were likely. However it is not always clear who dispensed such services.

In between these two extremes, we find a variety of types of temples, sanctuaries and holy places, which differ in architectural design and dimension as well as in denomination (*bayt*, *māhram*, *ḥaram*, *mdqnt*, *mškn*, *dyr*, etc.) and location.¹⁰

In order to figure out how these sacred places were managed, we can read to a totally different and more distant witness: Diodorus Siculus (d. 27 CE). In his *Bibliotheca Historica*, describing the Arabian coast on the Red Sea (that he calls Arabian Gulf), after recounting about a palm-grove with an important place «barbarians made sacred» because of its fertility, cared by «a man and a woman who hold the sacred office for life», and thus provided it with a stone altar (*bemos*) inscribed with mysterious script,¹¹ he mentions a particular, nay familiar, rite:

The coast which comes next was originally inhabited by the Maranitae, and then by the Garindanes [but Garindaioi in Strabo] who were their neighbours. The latter secured the country somewhat in this fashion: In the above-mentioned palm-grove a festival (*panēgūris*) was celebrated every four years (*sic!* Actually five: *pentaetērikēs*), to which the neighbouring peoples thronged from all sides, both to sacrifice to the gods of the sacred precinct (*temenei*) hecatombs of well-fed camels and also to carry back to their native lands some of the water of the place, since tradition prevailed that this drink gave health to such as partook of it. When for these reasons, then, the Maranitae gathered to the festival, the Garindanes, putting to the sword those who had been left behind in the country, and lying in ambush for those who were returning from the festival, utterly destroyed the tribe, and after stripping the country of its inhabitants they divided among themselves the plains.¹²

It is hard to both locate this shrine and to identify the two tribes involved in this story. Strabo, who gave the same news omitting some details, but crediting Artemidorus of Ephesus (1st century BCE) as his source, likely places it as being on the Sinai coast of the 'Aqaba Gulf.¹³ Anyway this may be another piece of the puzzle in investigating the features of Arabian shrines and the rituals connected to them.

But once stated that the holy place was the focus, or at least the more visible centre of pagan devotion, the question is: what made a place a holy place? Is there any religious concept that connects such distant and different types of Arabian holy places? And then, were temples and sanctuaries worshiped by a single local community, be it a tribe or a confederation of tribes, or could they attract the devotion of distant communities? In other words: were they connected to each other in a sort of integrated temple-system or was each sanctuary (and the community devoted to it) competing with the others?

⁹ This word may apply to the oracle or to the place inside the sacred space reserved to this function (see inscriptions quoted in MARAQTEN 2015 pp. 109 and 112. Hints preserved in Arab-Muslim Tradition about the Ka'ba (*SIRA*, b. 130, p. 191; p. 45 of English translation) would confirm the existence in Mecca of a specific area for incubation and receiving responses.

¹⁰ See DE MAIGRET 1996, pp. 271-288; also MARION DE PROCÉ 2015.

¹¹ DIODORUS *BIBLIOTHECA*, III, 42, 3-4.

¹² *Ibidem*, 43, 1-2.

¹³ STRABO *GEOGRAPHY*, XVI, 4, 18.

We see indeed that as long as the Awam temple, for instance, was surely the most important for the Saba' community, it was not the only one in the Ma'rib region. There was a second temple (the so called 'Arš Bilqis, or the temple of Ilmuqah of Baran) not far from it, a third temple was inside the city walls, and several other shrines and sanctuaries in the hills and mountains nearby. It is likely that each one had its deputy function separated from the others, but it might be connected to them in some way.

In inscription RES 4176 from Ri'ām, for instance, the god Ṭa'lab established detailed rules for managing the pilgrimage and the tithe, but he also authorizes his people «to attend [a pilgrimage to] Ilmuqah in Ma'rib» (*hḥdrn 'lmqh 'dy Mrb*) on a given month. We may suspect that political reasons lie behind connections between sanctuaries, and we can only hypothesize that at least in some periods of South Arabian history the temple system was joined up into a connected network.¹⁴

Anyway from that and many other inscriptions we deduce that the gods were involved in many aspects of economic and social life of ancient Arabian society; and they went beyond only ethical or devotional realms. Kings, nobles and ordinary people presented offerings to the gods not only to ask favours, but frequently to thank them for any kind of support: for healing, of course, but also for support in building houses and any kind of infrastructure; for success in business, in battles as well as diplomatic missions, etc.

This suggests that temple officials were not mere priests officiating religious rites, and sometimes kings and governors acted in that role as well, at least in ancient South Arabia. The religious office was thus very close to that of the administrators and managers.

As for late ancient Central Arabia, Muslim Tradition seems to say, through the words of Ibn al-Kalbī, that each tribe had its own temple and god, and that only the Meccan Ka'ba hosted a multiplicity of deities and could gather all Arabian tribes for a yearly or seasonal pilgrimage.

But even in the smaller scale of Mecca we find some common features with the South Arabian "temple system", for example the management of pilgrimage as regulated by Qurayš in 6th century or earlier, i. e. at the time of Quṣayy b. Kilāb (five generations before the the Prophet). In the words of Quṣayy, who was appointed as king by Meccan people, and depicted as a great lawgiver, the offices of feeding (*rifāda*) and watering (*siqāya*) the pilgrims during the seasonal pilgrimage were established as follows:

«You [= the Qurayš] are God's neighbours (*ḡīrān*, also "servants" or "subjects") and the people of His temple (*bayt* = "house"). The pilgrims and the visitors to His temple are God's guests and have the highest claim on your generosity; so provide food and drink for them during the pilgrimage until they depart out of you». Accordingly they used to pay him every year a tax on their flock and he used to provide food for the people therefrom, while they were at Minā, and his people carried out this order of his during the time of ignorance until Islam came.¹⁵

¹⁴ See KOROTAYEV 1996, in particular pp. 60-65 and 117-130, for many details on the legal, financial and political functions of South Arabian sanctuaries.

¹⁵ *SIRA*, b. 129, p. 176; pp. 55-56 of English translation. Quṣayy's nephew Hāšim b. 'Abd Manāf (great-grandfather of the Prophet) confirmed this rule with exactly the same words when he took at his turn the charge of the *rifāda* and *saqāya*.

This discourse has a strong political implication: a tribesman becomes king of the town and administrates it by organizing a fiscal levy related to a religious rite.

Further connections may be found, provided by further details, when looking at more recent situations.

R. B. Serjeant, in his seminal paper on the *ḥawṭa* (“sacred enclave”) of Ḥaḍramawt¹⁶ profiled several functions of similar shrines in 20th century Ḥaḍramawt comparing them to the functions of Meccan *ḥaram* as we deduce them from Muslim sources.

Describing such places, he mainly stressed the function of administration of justice, run by a saint (or his descendants) in a well defined sacred enclave where some taboos (hunting, cutting trees, bloodshed) are imposed.¹⁷

From other studies describing contemporary Yemenite shrines (SERJEANT 1954, DAUM 1987 and 2015) further characteristics about visiting rites, festivals, folklore literature and poetry emerged, which permitted the drawing of a more complex – though in many parts still fuzzy – picture of the religious structure built around the idea of “holy place”.

The shrine is frequently placed near a water spring or a well or even in a dry *wādī*, but the narrative mythology about its foundation usually recounts of a foreign hero who tames a wild demon (a tyrannic guardian of the water) and then marries a local woman. Rites and ceremonies of the annual festival appears to be related to that wedding banquet.¹⁸ The “visiting time” to the sanctuary is indeed connected with seasonal schedules, usually in the second week of the (lunar) month, and it offers an occasion for great gatherings of people from the whole region. In this the justice and the free-port functions join together. It is perhaps the “foreigner status” of the shrine tenders (the saint or his descendants who usually do not belong to local tribes) that gives them the *super partes* authority to guarantee this peaceful situation.

The activities connected with this kinds of shrines thus involve crucial aspects of economic life of the society and the communities that join in it: since all local and distant tribes could meet there in safety, contrasts between tribes may be solved under the authority of a (religiously) acknowledged figure, contracts and alliances may be signed as well as any kind of dealing. To the basic sphere of the agricultural-pastoral economy, the commercial factor is added as well: markets can take place during the pilgrimage week, or maybe soon before it, in the neighborhood of its sacred space where safety is again guaranteed by an acknowledged legal (and divine) authority.

The strengthening and the renewing of a feeling of solidarity among the participants of such festivals is an aftermath of these activities. In fact the adherence of a community to a sanctuary means also that it joined and acknowledged the common-law (*dīn*) of the tenders of the that same sanctuary and its other supporter communities.

A synergy between sparse sanctuaries would sound odd whence these are conceived as championing the identity of a single community, but one cannot separate the importance of such

¹⁶ SERJEANT 1962.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*. Note that in the above quoted verse of Koran (II 125: «We made the House a refuge (*maʿāba*) and safety (*amn*) for the people») a similar role is given to Abraham/Ibhāhīm, who is so referred not only as the concrete builder of the Sacred House, but also as the tender of the *ḥaram* and guarantor of safety.

¹⁸ It is obviously necessary to be cautious in such generalization, sparse hints seem to point that the narrative pattern is plausible; see DAUM 1987 and 2016; also MASCITELLI 2018.

religious festivals – which occur with a yearly cadence for the sedentary communities who host them, but which had a seasonal rotation among different communities¹⁹ – with the activity of the mobile segment of the Arabian society who used to attend many of these holidays for commercial purposes, beside religious ones.

Coming back again to late antiquity, Arab-Muslim sources²⁰ preserved a tradition of the “famous markets of the Arabs before Islam” in which the commercial routes are set in a perfectly circular (or spiral) scheme that fits in with the calendar of the solar year: the cycle starts from Dūma al-Ġandal in Central Arabia, then moves clockwise to the Gulf area, then to Oman, Dhofar, Yemen and finally moves northward to ‘Ukaz and the markets nearby from the month of Dū al-Qa‘da to the beginning of Dū al-Ḥiġġa, to end in Khaybar and Yamāma, after that month.

Michael Bonner (2011 and 2012) conducted a thorough analysis of these sources. He remarked that this sequence may reflect the situation of Arabia in the late 6th and early 7th century: many of these markets are indeed placed in regions that in those times were under a strong Sasanian political influence; the markets of ‘Aden and Ṣan‘ā’ are expressively said to be under the rule of the Abnā’, a term denoting the descendants of Persian governors in Yemen (580-629 ca.); only few (al-Šiḥr in the land of Mahra and al-Rābya in Ḥaḍramawt, this latter in synchronicity with ‘Ukaz) are specifically said to be outside of any monarchic control; moreover, albeit also Qurayš are told to attend many of those same markets, the main sources of this tradition are attached to the Tamīm tribe whose relationship with Persia was quite strong in those same times,²¹ and Yamāma (the terminal point of the circle) was reckoned as one of Tamīm’s motherlands. Bonner also stressed the importance of the calendar of these markets: they are scheduled according to the lunar months, but the yearly cycle must reflect the solar year – in order to respect, for instance, the monsoon wind season for the markets in the Gulf, in Oman and along the Yemenite coast which used to deal with India, as well as the agricultural and pastoral natural seasons for other markets. Thus an intercalary month was needed. This month was called *nasī’* in Mecca, where it was fixed by an officiant at the end of the month of Dū al-Ḥiġġa, after the pilgrimage – a custom subsequently abolished in the Islamic calendar.

It is also worth noticing that several – though not all – of these markets are expressively said to be placed not far from holy places: al-Šiḥr was «under the shadow (*taḥta zill!*) of the mountain upon which the tomb of Hūd is»; the fairs of ‘Ukaz, Maġanna and Dū al Maġaz – whose exact location is hard to be placed – were surely halfway from, or in the neighborhood of both Ṭā’if and Mecca: they are said to be «close to ‘Arafāt», i.e. the place of the great gathering of Muslim *ḥaġġ*.²² As for Ṣan‘ā’, we are told that during the 6th century at least one attempt was carried on to set up a pilgrimage to its great church by its rulers (see further).

Some considerations can be made on this: the organization of such a complex commercial network needs rules. We are told about the hail (*taḥḥīr*) traders had to address to the tender of the market, as well as the different methods of bargaining or auctioning, the tensions between

¹⁹ As we will see, the adoption by Islam of a full lunar calendar disrupted this system, so that nowadays these festivals must have been completely re-scheduled.

²⁰ They are mainly: MUḤABBAR, pp. 263-268; YA‘QŪBĪ TA‘RĪḤ, I pp. 313-314; and AL-MARZŪQĪ AZMĪNA, ġ. 2, pp. 161-170.

²¹ BONNER 2012, pp. 75-76 and 81-83.

²² See MUḤABBAR, p. 266.

tribes sometimes resolved through poetry competitions, the tithe (*‘ašūr*) system, and son on.²³ Thus any interference in shifting or changing those rules, or in standardizing them, would have a relevant effect on the increase or decrease of the development of the commercial mobile segment of the Arabian society.

So even though what is described in the “market discourse” (*hadīt al-aswāq*) reflects an early 7th century scenario, it may be a very early custom based on the past, as the synchronism with a solar calendar allows us to suppose.

A second commercial cyclic-route is indeed preserved in Arab-Muslim sources: it concerns the Meccan Qurayš and it is possibly some half century older than the *hadīt al-aswāq* quoted above. It is recorded as a list of commercial deals Hāšim b. ‘Abd Manāf (the great-grandfather of the Prophet) obtained from the most important rulers of his time. He started in Abyssinia and its Negus (*Nağāšī*); then moved to Yemen where he got the deal from Abraha (the Abyssinian viceroy); the next step was in the North, in a Syria ruled by the Ġassānid king Ġabala b. al-Ayham and then in Lower Iraq by Qabāḍ. These details are found in the *Nihāya al-irab fī aḥbār al-Furs wa-l-‘Arab*,²⁴ while other sources only report that Hāšim was the first to organize the Qurayš travels in winter and summer (as is referred to in the Koran, CVI 1-2);²⁵ or that the four sons of ‘Abd Manāf (Hāšim, ‘Abd Šams, Nawfal and Muṭṭalib) got the deal respectively from the Greek rulers of Syria and Ġassān, from the Negus, from Persian emperors, and from the Ḥimyar kings.²⁶ At first glance this account of Qurayš trade-routes appears as a simple extension of Koran CVI 1-2. But the details found in *Nihāya* – the references to the Sasanian king Qabāḍ (r. 488-531), to Abraha (who started ruling in 525 ca.) and the Ġassānid Ġabala (d. 529) – actually give sound chronology for a period (525-529) when all the countries named were ruled by Christian-oriented kings, so they may contain some grains of historical truth, or at least reveal the intent of the writer to set the story in a credible historical context.

If we compare the two [traditions on] trade-routes we find that they are specular each other and seldom share points of contact. As long as the “Tamīmī” route falls in the Sasanian sphere of influence and crosses the Eastern part of the Peninsula, Hāšim’s route is strongly Christian-Byzantine oriented and mainly focused on the Western part of Arabia, except perhaps for Qabāḍ (but we know that the wife of Lakhmid king al-Munḍir, ruling in Lower Iraq as a Sasanian vassal, was an enthusiastic Christian). The differences might also reflect a chronological shift between the two traditions: one placed in a time when Christian-Byzantine influence prevailed over the Peninsula, while the other attests a stronger Sasanian power over the region, which actually took place from the last quarter of the 6th century until 629 ca.

Effectively a reprise of wide range land-route commerce in Arabia was visible from the mid

²³ MUḤABBAR, pp. 263-268.

²⁴ See KISTER 1972, pp. 61-62. The news about Hāšim in *Nihāya* are respectively at f.174r and f.134r of manuscripts Add. 23298 and Add. 18505 of the British Museum (today in the British Library). I had access to the digital copies the two manuscripts by courtesy of British Library and with the support of Pisa University PRA (Progetti di Ricerca di Ateneo) 2016 “Oriente e Occidente: da un mondo all’altro? Contatti, scambi, identità”, coordinated by prof. Marilina Betrò, to whom I am grateful. For details about the *Nihāya*, see further in the next paragraph.

²⁵ *SIRA*, b. 138, p. 183; p. 58 of English translation.

²⁶ ṬABARĪ *TA’RIḤ*, p. 1089; vol. 5, pp. 16-17 of English translation.

5th century and it is not infrequently related to the activity of Christian figures.²⁷ Many could be the reasons for this reprise, and the relationship between trade and religion probably needs further investigation.

Beside any economic reason, we see a curious fact: trade-routes and markets are on the one hand connected with pagan shrines and scheduled on their seasonal festivals; on the other hand they were improved by the expansion of Christian or monotheistic authorities.

In fact we must not forget that between the 4th and the 5th centuries a crucial change occurred in the whole region: in those years the governors of Europe, North-Africa and Western-Asia shifted from paganism to monotheism. And this shift affected also Arabia. We will try to check some of the traces that this important event left in the Arab-Muslim Tradition.

A wizard document (reprise)

I opened Part II of this ARABI series quoting the alliance pact between Rabīʿa and Qaḥṭān, sealed under appointment of the Ḥimyar king Tubbaʿ b. Malkī Karib, as reported by al-Dīnawarī (d. 283/896 ca.).²⁸ I was thence more interested in the political and historiographical implications of the episode, and paid less attention to the contents of the document itself and the pre-Islamic framework in which it is alleged to have been produced. Thus I could only figure out that it could be related to the campaigns Abū Karib Asʿad (Tubbaʿ b. Malkīkarib) conducted towards Central Arabia during his reign, celebrated in the Arab-Muslim Tradition and confirmed by epigraphic evidence.²⁹

Recently I had occasion to check another source, only partially published, which includes a second and more complete version of that story: the *Nihāya al-irab fī aḥbār al-Furs wa-l-ʿArab* (“The final purpose on the news about the Persians and Arabs”) a work preserved in several manuscripts in European libraries.³⁰ This work is ascribed to al-Aṣmaʿī (d. 213/828), but it is highly suspected to be apocryphal; nevertheless a dating to the beginning of 9th century CE is not unlikely.³¹ The subject matter of the *Nihāya* is the history of Persian Sasanian kings chronologically crossed with the Yemenite kings of Ḥimyar dynasty, with many digressions on events and episodes concerning North Arabian tribes. The main sources of this book are said to be ʿĀmir b. Sharāḥīl al-Shaʿbī (d. between 102/721 and 109/728, but here he frequently speaks on the authority of ʿAbīd b. Šariyya, d. around 60/680) and Ayyūb Ibn al-Qirriyya (d. 84/703) as far as the Arabian kings are concerned, and Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. 132/750) for the Persian kings.

²⁷ See ROBIN 2014c, in particular pp. 290-304.

²⁸ See *ARABI II*, pp. 7-9.

²⁹ See particularly inscriptions Ry 509 and Ry 534+MAFRAY/Rayda 1; complete list of inscriptions where the name of king Abū Karib Asʿad occurs (alone or associated to his father or his sons): Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 2, Gar Sharahbil A, Gab BSE, Byn M17, Ja 516, Ja 520, Ja 856, Ry 447, Ry 509 and Ry 534+MAFRAY/Rayda 1.

³⁰ I refer here to manuscripts Add. 23.298 and Add. 18.505 of the British Museum (today in the British Library); another copy is preserved in the Library of Cambridge University (1201, qq. 225, p. 241 according to Browne’s catalogue 1900); a fourth one is in Gotha Library (Ms Or.1741, vol. 3, p. 328 in Wilhelm Pertsch’s catalogue).

³¹ Excerpts of this work, together with summaries and critical observations, have been edited in BROWNE 1899 and 1900, and GRIGNASCHI 1969 and 1973; see also HAMEEN-ANTTILA 2018, pp. 89-90.

The cross check of the different sources of the two versions of that alliance pact is worth carrying out, and the same can be said of a thorough investigation of their textual differences.

Firstly it must be remarked that al-Dīnawarī rarely quotes his sources: as for pre-Islamic history he refers mainly to ‘Abīd b. Šariyya (for Arabia and Yemen in particular) and Ibn al-Muqaffa’ for Persia, but he also speaks of “other scholars”.³² Since Ibn al-Muqaffa’ is also the main source for Persian kings in *Nihāya*, and ‘Abid b. Šariyya (through al-Ša’bī) is sometimes quoted as well, this would point to a coincidence of the sources of both *Nihāya* and al-Dīnawarī. Yet many are the differences in the two texts when narrating the same story concerning the document we are dealing with, and it seems that the two writers did not use a common source in this case. The *Nihāya* puts it in its historical frame inside the stories of the Ḥimyarite king As’ad al-Kāmil and, though not quoted in that passage, its source is likely the same as the preceding stories (i. e. al-Ša’bī, possibly through ‘Abīd b. Šariyya). Contrastively al-Dīnawarī’s mention of the document occurs while he is reporting events of 744 CE Khorasan.³³ In this case he does not mention his source – which likely was not an expert of pre-Islamic Yemen – but expressively says that the document was owned by ‘Umar b. Ibrahīm, a Yemenite descendant based in Bašra.

This multiplicity of sources, in some way confirmed by the textual differences, allows us to suppose that the document was well known and circulated in various versions in the first half of the 8th century. And, if we believe *Nihāya* – whose sources might also precede the episode recorded by al-Dīnawarī – this document was already known at the very beginning of that century, if not before.

As for the textual analysis,³⁴ some remarks can be drafted. Beside linguistic variations,³⁵ some variants may be traces of mistakes or misunderstandings of copyists or, at least, of different attitude in censoring the pagan flavour in passages of the text.³⁶ In fact the rites accompanying the pact are also relevant: the two allying parts mix their blood, their hair and their fingernails and then bury that mix in a pit together with a written copy of the pact itself.

The location of this pit differs in the two versions: al-Dīnawarī says «they put it together in a pocket and buried it under a deep water (*mā’ ġamr*) on the shore of a pit of a lake», while *Nihāya* has «they wrote this in Udum ‘Ukāzī and posited it in a pit of a house (*bayt*) under a deep water». The “house” here is likely a temple in al-Ṭā’if or its neighborhood,³⁷ and the deep water is possibly a well-spring close to where shrines are usually located. It is clear that the *Nihāya* version preserved (or tried to reproduce?) a genuine pre-Islamic atmosphere: that

³² See BONNER 2014, p. 76; see also BROWNE 1900.

³³ There is nothing about this story in the passage that deals with the king Tubba’ b. Malīkarib (AL-DĪNAWARĪ, p. 48).

³⁴ The full text of the document is given further in TALE 1, together with its English translation.

³⁵ The use of VIII verbal stem instead of V (*iḥṭalafa* and *iġṭadā* for *taḥāḷafa* and *ġadā*) and different plural schemes (*aš’ūr* for *šu’ūr* and *aẓfār* for *aẓāfir*) in al-Dīnawarī may be significant dialectal variations marking the origin of the transmitters. Note also the two different expressions: *ḡū al-aḡḡāl* in *Nihāya* and *mu’din al-faḡl* in al-Dīnawarī (both meaning “the excellent”).

³⁶ The variant *bi-ḡamr* (for *bi-ḡamr*?) in al-Dīnawarī instead of *yaḡrumu* (or *yuḡarrimu*) is likely a misreading of the copyist if not by the author himself: the rasm of the two words is very similar, but the rite so described in al-Dīnawarī (“drinking blood mixed with wine (?)”) looks rather bizarre, while the sentence in *Nihāya* has sound meaning (“in order to prevent the blood of the one [to be shed by] the other”).

³⁷ YĀQŪT (*MU’ĠAM*, I, p. 126, s.v. *Udum*) records Udum ‘Ukāzī as a borough (*min qurā*) of al-Ṭā’if.

pit is likely nothing but the *gabgab* (literally the “wattle” or “dewlap”) that every sanctuary, including the Ka‘ba, was provided with to stock and preserve offers, and was thus frequently addressed as a “treasure”.

If we then look at some of the expressions used to stress the “eternity” of the pact,³⁸ they may sound somehow colourful: while the eternity of sunrise and sunset or the movements of the stars are clearly understandable metaphors, and sentences like «until the Euphrates (*furāt*, also “fresh waters”) will dry» – and *Nihāya* adds «and the crows will live» – might be, at first sight, lyrical embellishment, there are other more enigmatic expressions that need to be explained. For example: «a man wearing a shoe» or «a rider going and coming back» recalls the activity of an infantryman and a horseman or perhaps of a merchant. Then we read in *Nihāya* (literal translation): «as long as a boy will call his father, a servant (‘*abd*) milk [in] his jar, the carriers (*hawāmil*) take charge of it and the receivers receive it, and a fighter will defend people»; and the pair in al-Dīnawarī: «as long as a boy will call his father, as long as a servant will milk [in] his jar, the carriers take charge of it and the receivers receive it, as long as a receiver (*qābil*) after one year will bring forth».

I think that in such expressions a reference can be seen either to the people who signed this pact or their practical purpose (i.e. horsemen, soldiers or merchants), but also to a religious authority of some kind that would watch over the pact, likely the god inhabiting the “house” (read: temple) in whose “pit” (a spring or a well) the pact was buried to be preserved to eternity. Thus *furāt* here is not the Euphrates river, but a generic “fresh-water”, or a specific well. What follows appears to be connected with pastoral activity; but the sentence «A servant will milk in his jar» may be also a metaphor meaning “a male will pour his semen in his female”, so that «the pregnant females (*hawāmil*) keep their pregnancy on, and the females in labour will give birth and would receive [again] after one year» can be interpreted as references to a natural eternal process – possibly referring to animals – that needs the protection of a fertility deity, like the goddess Allāt actually worshiped in al-Ṭā’if was.

This all adds more than a *ḡāhiliyya* (i. e. pagan) flavour to the text. Read in this way, these expressions seem to imply a genuine pagan thought expressed in an obscure (for us, of course) linguistic style. If these considerations and the reading of the text proposed above are more than a pure impression, their consequences on the whole story of the alliance pact would be relevant. Be it an 8th century fake trying to reproduce a document of some 300 years before, or a genuine 7th century document originated in the context of *fitna* wars, rather than a 5th century original, nevertheless it testifies that in the early Islamic age such “pagan” practices and rituals were known and retained as credible. So much credible that they may contribute to the resolving of political questions. Moving a step further: still in the middle of the 8th century there were people inclined to accept a deal signed with the guarantee of a pagan authority.

But also when projected onto [the Islamic vision of] the pre-Islamic past, the implications are relevant. This would confirm that al-Ṭā’if was considered to be an important place for signing allegiance treaties in the shade of its shrine and in the vicinity of the great fairs of ‘Ukāz and Ḍū al-Maḡāz. This prestigiousness is thrown back to the 5th century during the time of Tubba‘ Abū

³⁸ This kind of *formula* is traditional in Arabic legal texts since the beginnings of Arabic language; see for example the inscription (in South Arabian script) from Qaryat al-Fāw (ANSARY 1982, pp. 146 and 63), where the eternity is identified with “the rain falling” and “the barley growing”.

Karib As‘ad, and again later at the time of the (in)famous Abraha’s campaign against Mecca, in the so called “Year of the Elephant”, quoted in the Koran CV 1, and thus subjected to broad explanations and extensions.

According to the Arab-Muslim Tradition, Abraha’s intention was to divert Arab pilgrimage from Mecca to his brand new church in Ṣan‘ā’³⁹ – the al-Qalīs that we saw listed by Ibn al-Kalbī among pagan sanctuaries! Hearing about his intentions, some Arabs from Banū Kināna or Banū Mālik (supposed to live in Ṣan‘ā’), profaned the church. Abraha asked about who they were, and he was told they were people from the Temple in Mecca. He thus moved northward to Mecca; on the way many tribes submitted to him and offered to serve him as guides; before marching to Mecca he stopped in al-Ṭā’if, where he received several delegation to negotiate – among these also ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet’s grand-father, here credited as the chief of the Meccan sanctuary.⁴⁰

In Ibn Ḥabīb’s version of the story⁴¹ king Abraha decided to punish the Arab profaners who were, he is told, «people of the temple of the Arabs» (*ahl bayt al-‘Arab*). In this version it is clear that Abraha did not know what “the temple of the Arabs” was nor where it was, and he indeed took some Arabs as guides.⁴² These ones – we are told – were not devoted to the (Meccan) sanctuary: most of them were from Ḥaṭ‘am tribe and other tribes that «did not perform *ḥaḡḡ* nor respected the Ḥaram» (*kānū la yaḥaḡḡūna al-bayt wa-lā yaḥramūna al-ḥaram*).⁴³

When Abraha stopped in al-Ṭā’if, a man of Ṭaqīf tribe named Mas‘ūd b. Mu‘attib gave to him wine, raisins and leather (the renowned products of that town) as a present and said to him: «Ye king, this one [evidently referring to the temple of Allāt in al-Ṭā’if] is not the temple you are looking for; the greater (*a‘zam*) temple you are looking for is the one whose people did to you what they did. We are part of your kingdom, so go forth! If you consider it in depth, you will see in us your own opinion».⁴⁴ In his speech Mas‘ūd seems to credit preeminence to Meccan sanctuary, but we are told he is an evil sinner or liar (*a munkar*), and his only purpose is to preserve his own sanctuary which, for sure, he considered more important. A second remark must be made on this: he says that al-Ṭā’if belongs to Abraha’s kingdom and that they share the same opinion, i. e. creed. We can be sure of the Christian faith of Abraha, but what was the religion of the people of al-Ṭā’if? They were surely “dirty idolatres” in the eye of Muslim Tradition, but this episode gives a hint to about the possible penetration of some form of Christian monotheism (on this see further).

Again al-Ṭā’if and its neighborhood are in this narrative presented as a place where negotiation and dealing may be carried out. Here is where Abraha set his throne and received ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib who wanted to ransom back the two hundred camels the men of Abraha stole from him.⁴⁵

³⁹ In the two versions reported by ṬABARĪ (*TA’RIḤ*, pp. 934-935, vol. 5, pp. 217 and 221 of English translation) he expressively said so in a letter sent to the Abyssinian king (*Naḡāšī*).

⁴⁰ ṬABARĪ *TA’RIḤ*, b. I pp. 935-937; vol. 5, pp. 217-223 of English translation.

⁴¹ *MUNAMMAQ*, p. 68.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 68-76; on this see also KISTER 1972.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 73. The same episode in ṬABARĪ (*TA’RIḤ*, p. 937; vol. 5, p. 223 of English translation) lacks some details

⁴⁵ ṬABARĪ *TA’RIḤ*, pp. 938-939; vol. 5, pp. 224-226 of English translation.

The political and religious role of al-Ṭāʾif lasted on into the next century, in the time of Muḥammad: before being forced to move to Yaṭrib/Medina pushed by the Meccan elite's persecution, the Prophet himself went to al-Ṭāʾif and tried to convert Ṭāqīf tribesmen to his religion, but he failed.⁴⁶ The Ṭāqīf of al-Ṭāʾif was then the last tribe to surrender to Islam in the month of Ramaḍān of the year 9 (December 630), after almost one year of negotiation.⁴⁷

Muslim sources thus placed the town of al-Ṭāʾif and its shrine into a hard competitive position with respect to the Meccan sanctuary. We do not know whether this competition was actually as old as the details found in narrative would point, or those same narrations were only attempts at attributing to the rivalry between two sanctuaries, located quite far from the most important area of the Peninsula, a pan-Arabian status in both a political and a religious perspective. Yet one option does not exclude the other.

What we see is that in the urge to find a balance between pagan and monotheistic details in this narrative – cleansing the first when referring to Mecca and eventually maintaining some of them when referred to al-Ṭāʾif – the Muslim Tradition possibly confused the issue and missed the point.

Looking again at the story of Abū Karib Asʿad can be interesting and clarifying. The Tradition is unanimous about his campaigns in the North; some authors push his raids, moved by simple will of conquest, to the far East, some to Persia, some to Syria; most of the sources agree on his passing – on the way back to Yemen – by Yaṭrib and Mecca where he performed a *ʿumra* and met two rabbis who went with him to Yemen and introduced monotheism there. The *Nihāya* instead only talks about his will to revenge the “Four Kings” killed by northern tribes (the Maʿadd led by a Kināna tribesman) when they tried to divert the pilgrimage from Mecca to Yemen.⁴⁸ So when he reached Ḥiḡāz in Udum ʿUkāz, possibly near al-Ṭāʾif, he signed the treaty with the Rabīʿa tribe, which abandoned its northern allied of Maʿadd. It is not said if Asʿad's stop between ʿUkāz and al-Ṭāʾif was synchronic with any religious happening or a fair which may have fostered political dealings, but the mention of fingernails and hair – that the covenanting parts mixed and buried to sign the alliance – in both *Nihāya* and al-Dīnawārī versions of the pact may be a reference to the obligation of shaving after a pilgrimage (similar to how it is a duty after the Muslim *ḥaḡḡ* to ʿArafāt and Muzdalifa); thus it is plausible that Tubbaʿ Asʿad b. Malkīkarib gave his assent to a pact between two tribes (one of the two was “his” Qaḡṭān) that likely had just accomplished their pilgrimage rites in one of the sacred place of the area. After

⁴⁶ See ṬABARĪ *TAʾRĪḤ*, pp. 1299-1202; vol. VI, pp. 115-117 of English translation. Note that in this narration ʿAddād, the slave who helped Muḥammad in his difficulty, is said to be a Christian from Nineveh and he recognized Muḥammad's prophecy because he knew the Scriptures (he knew about prophet Jonah being sent to Nineveh).

⁴⁷ The timing is in this case relevant: Muḥammad first moved towards al-Ṭāʾif when he heard about the Ḥawāzin tribe (Ṭāqīf allied) preparing for war against him and camping in a valley near Dū al-Maḡāz, he defeated them there; then he put siege to the city of al-Ṭāʾif, but cannot find the way to enter in town. It was the month of Dū al-Qaʿda, i. e. the time when fairs usually took place in ʿUkāz, Maḡanna and Dū al-Maḡāz, so from a military point of view it might be an attempt to rule the Ṭāqīf out of their markets. Since the siege failed, the prophet turned back to Medina, not even leading the pilgrimage to Mecca in the next month. The final surrender agreement – which implied the destruction of Allāt's idol – arrived eleven months later, in the (new) sacred month of Ramaḍān (ṬABARĪ *TAʾRĪḤ*, pp. 1669-71 and 1690-92; pp. 19-22 and 42-44 of English translation).

⁴⁸ On the “Four Kings” see *ARABĪ I*, TALE 4.

this the *Nihāya* indeed says nothing about Tubbaʿs performance of the *ʿumra* at the Kaʿba (as other sources does extensively): he totally ignored Mecca and went straight to Syria. According to this narration, Tubbaʿ Asʿad acts perfectly as a pagan ruler who has no intention of destroying the temple of the enemies; instead he recognizes its authority, performing the devotional acts and thus integrating it somehow into its system.

An interest of Ḥimyar kings for Central Arabia is confirmed by South Arabian inscriptions: in ʿAbadān 1 (dated 470 HE=360 CE) are attested raids launched against Maʿadd during the reign of ʿTaʿrān Yuhanʿim (ʿṬʿm Yhnʿm, r. between 324 and 375); Ry 509 from Wādī Maʿsāl in Naǧd, also speaking of a raid against Maʿadd in Central Arabia, is signed by Abū Karib himself (ʿbkrb ʿsʿd, r. 400-440 ca., but co-ruling since 380). The expression “and his Arabs of the Highland and the coastal Plain” added to the royal title of “king of Sabaʿ, Dū Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt and Yamna” assumed by Abū Karib Asʿad, presumes a success in these campaigns. Inscription Ry 510 in the same Wādī Maʿsāl attests also a raid of king Maʿdikarib Yaʿfur (Mʿdkrb Yʿfr) in 631 HE=521 CE.

According to the other Arab-Muslim sources Abū Karib Asʿad did perform the *ʿumra* at the Kaʿba: he circumambulated the temple seven times, slaughtered many animals and fed people, and also provided the Kaʿba with vestment and a door-lock. In doing this, he was again acting as a perfect pagan king: as suggested by the two rabbis, to whom Tubbaʿ asked for a counseling (see further TALE 1.2), he did «what its [= the temple] people do», and the same rabbis specified that «its people put idols all around it [...]» since «they are dirty polytheists». Thus Asʿad did what pagan kings were used to doing in South Arabia when they conquered a new community: they adopted the conquered shrine associating their own gods with it and occasionally sponsored some improvement of the same shrine.

Note that the intention of this narrative is to credit Tubbaʿ Asʿad as a forerunner of the Prophet in his performing (or restoring) a perfectly monotheistic *ḥaǧǧ* (or *ʿumra*), since after that he was going to convert all his country to monotheism.

Epigraphic sources confirm that during his reign a monotheistic creed spread and imposed itself over Yemen. Throughout the 4th century indeed, we see that the names of the gods invoked in inscriptions on any occasion since the beginning of South Arabian history, gradually disappeared, to be replaced by the “Lord of Heaven” or the “Lord of Earth and Sky”,⁴⁹ frequently called *Rḥmnn* (hypothetically read *Raḥmān*ⁿ = “the merciful”, but also “the rain-giver”). The first occurrences of this god trace back to the 4th century in peripheral areas, but they are more and more consistent since the last quarter of that century onward.⁵⁰ While during the reign of ʿTaʿrān Yuhanʿim we find it mentioned together with at least two occurrences of the main Sabaʿ-Ḥimyar god *ʿlmqh* (Ja 668 and Ja 671+788), under his successors Malkīkarib Yuhaʿmin (r. 375-400 ca.) and Abūkarib Asʿad all the pagan gods ceased to be mentioned in inscriptions, and the “Lord of Heaven”⁵¹ became the only divinity invoked. Inscriptions signed by some Yemenite noblemen may attribute to this god a Jewish connota-

⁴⁹ A god called “Lord of the Sky” (variously spelled *bʿl šmy* or *bʿl šmn*) was also worshiped, but in pagan context, in the North as in Syria and Nabataea, as we can read his name in Palmyrene and Safaitic (*bʿlsʿmn*).

⁵⁰ See ROBIN-RIJZIGER 2018; ROBIN 2014b, GAJDA 2009.

⁵¹ Different interpretations may be given to *Bʿlsʿmyn* = “Owner of the sky”, or *Mrʿsʿmyn* = “Lord of the Sky”; see ROBIN-RIJZIGER 2018.