

ARABIA ANTICA 10

PHILOLOGICAL STUDIES

BY LAND AND BY SEA
A history of South Arabia before Islam
recounted from inscriptions

ALESSANDRA AVANZINI



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ALESSANDRA AVANZINI
By land and by sea.
A history of South Arabia before Islam recounted from inscriptions

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Preface

The idea of writing this volume is, above all, to satisfy a practical need which I often experience during my university courses; that of being able to refer students to an up-to-date manual on the history of the kingdoms of South Arabia.

Some inscriptions, recently edited, have indeed improved and slightly revised the general historical reconstruction; these cannot be omitted in an introduction of Ancient South Arabian (ASA) history.

I am particularly grateful to Riccardo Contini for his suggestion to publish a collection of ASA inscriptions translated into Italian, within the series “Testi del Vicino Oriente antico”, which he supervises for Paideia publishing house. But preparing a collection of ASA inscriptions does require a periodization of the very long ASA history and its cultural development.

It seems banal to begin this introduction by complaining that there has been a generalized lack of interest toward the long ASA history by scholars of the ancient Near East. Probably only the scholars dealing with Late Antiquity seem to have been interested in South Arabia, in the Ḥimyarite kingdom, in its relations with Aksum, Byzantium and Sasanian Persia (see, among others, Bowersock 2013). This is also the only historical moment that the Arab-Muslim tradition dealt with, mainly because it is the only one known by this tradition.

But ASA culture formed well before then, at the beginning of the first millennium BC. It was part of the revolutionary organisation of the states at the beginning of the Iron period. The numerous and important scholars who studied the shift from the Bronze age to the Iron age in the Near East and in the Eastern Mediterranean area almost completely ignored the case of

the formation of the kingdoms in South Arabia, which present a completely similar chronology and similar models.

ASA epigraphic documentation tells of a culture far from the cultural centres located to the north of the Arabian peninsula, 'beyond the desert and the ocean' (as M. Liverani in 1997 entitled his article), but it is strictly related to them.

Many justifications may be found for the marginalisation of ASA history in Oriental studies. Some are reasons related to distorted causes; they are a result of the history of studies. The majority of the scholars dealing with the ancient Near East are experts in Biblical studies. The Bible does not deal with the history of the far Southern part of Arabia; there is only the description of the Queen of Sheba's journey, in few verses of the first book of Kings. Orientalists with a sound knowledge of Biblical sources certainly found the *corpus* of Aramaic inscriptions, with its exciting elements in common with the Bible description, more interesting, than the ASA *corpus* in which the shared elements cover only a handful of toponyms.

Even the Queen of Sheba is not mentioned, which may have been the only interesting subject for ASA history!

The history of South Arabia is part of the history of the ancient Near East. Within its history there are undoubtedly issues to be discussed from a broader perspective. I remember, as an example, the birth of the ASA alphabetical script, at the end of the second millennium; an element unforgettable for a general reconstruction of the history of the alphabet.

But the reason for this marginalization of ASA history, within the studies on the Near East, lies with the scholars who deal with this history in the first place.

A. Jamme criticised the scholars meeting in Oxford to discuss ASA inscriptions with Alfred Beeston, and he referred them as 'a club' that spent time agreeing with each other and drinking beer. This is clearly a false statement (maybe not for the beer, but certainly for the supposed lack of different points of view), but there is a grain of truth in it.

South Arabian studies are a niche. I believe that the scholars studying this history and its sources have a tendency to discuss hypothetical dates for some inscriptions, and emphasize some historical periods, rather than trying to share with other scholars from different disciplines the rich material they have at hand.

I have always believed that this tendency was wrong. It is impossible to seize the attention of scholars (linguists or historians) from other disciplines, if the direct ASA written sources are only accessed by specialists

in the field. This is the reason why I initiated a project, which has been continuing for some years now, aimed at collecting and disseminating ASA inscriptions online.

There is a lack of a history manual that informs on the hypotheses, doubts, and also on the few reference points of a history that lasted for over 1,500 years. Not surprisingly, the two books that recently have tried to pull together the threads of historical facts were written by two scholars that do not deal primarily with South Arabia (Schippmann 1998; Hoylard 2001). The scholars on South Arabia are more interested in writing about specific issues rather than adventuring in historical synthesis.

The book by A. de Maigret remains the only book written by a scholar that has been working in South Arabia for many years, and this is why it is still of pivotal importance in the field (de Maigret 2002). But de Maigret was an archaeologist: archaeological sources, though vital, are still not enough to recount the whole history of ancient South Arabia.

In this booklet I tried to recount ASA history starting from the inscriptions. I believe that pre-Islamic South Arabia is one of the few cases, maybe the only case in the ancient world, where a culture and its history may be reconstructed on the basis (almost exclusively) of an epigraphic *corpus*.

If a history that lasted for over 1,500 years, with a complex geographical development, has been somehow reconstructed on the basis of inscriptions – with all due difficulties and uncertainties along the way – I hoped that with this present work it would be possible to catch a glimpse of the wide variety of the epigraphic ASA *corpus*.

I believe, since I have been working in this field for many years now, that ASA epigraphic texts prove to be an exciting challenge that allows the reconstruction not only of events and material data, but also of a culture made of beliefs and ideas.

At first sight, epigraphic texts seem disappointing, repetitive and frankly boring. But an epigraphic text, approached beyond word-to-word translation, which is often difficult and uncertain, with a preference for the general meaning of the inscription, can open our eyes to a world.

The direct source par excellence, not handed down by Benedictine monks but written while the events narrated were happening by the actors in history themselves, often reduces itself to remembering proper names. Gods, kings, generals, rich and powerful men, the few women – indeed rich and of a high social class – palaces, temples, irrigation works; all are recorded with their proper names. More often than not, the proper name is all that is known and has survived.

We can be satisfied with the events attested in our texts, but we can also try and see whether indirect data may be derived from texts.

If we pose a few general questions, this may prove useful to find answers: why was an inscription commissioned? To whom and in which context was it written? What general content was meant to survive for eternity? Why did the author prefer to have the inscription written on the base of a statuette or on the rock of a mountain?

Inscriptions offer much information on the role that a culture assigns to public written documents, to the creation of a shared identity. They are not the work of an individual; they were commissioned to professional scribes, they follow fixed schemes, which according to a codified tradition are meant to pass on a specific content.

Inscriptions obviously give a partial image of the history. Nobody commissions a public text to preserve the memory of their military defeats, but only the history of victories (true or presumed) is remembered on stone or melted in bronze and only, for obvious reasons, the history of high classes in society. But, thanks to their variety, ASA inscriptions tell us much more than perennial victories. For example: in few epigraphic documentations from the ancient world (as in the ASA documentation) the frequent problems in the relations between state and clergy, the king's mistakes that caused the wrath of the gods and the need to amend emerges with clarity. The economic role of the temple, the power of the clergy that sometimes substituted the state's justice are witnessed in many of our texts.

Historical consistency is recognisable not only by the palaeographic and content changes but, in a more indirect way, from the long process that must be hypothesised behind the codified realisation of inscriptions and of the creation of an iconographic style of their supports.

Moreover many new texts have been edited during these last years, where new events and protagonists come alive, such as the great king Yatha'amar Watar, who up to only few years ago was completely unknown. As early as the 8th century he tried to impose Sabaeen rule over the whole country.

I wanted to call this booklet 'By land and by sea' (*b-ybs'n w-bhrn*) starting from a phrase attested in a Qatabanic inscription to indicate the great distances and difficult journeys of the caravans from the South of Arabia to the Levant, Egypt, and Mesopotamia.

The importance of commerce and of relationships is, I believe, a pivotal aspect worth emphasising beginning from the title, beyond the specificity of a culture isolated and perched on top of its mountains, at the edge of the large Arabian desert.

Actually, nobody ever denied that South Arabia was not committed to commerce. The country of perfumes had to sell its most sought-after products to nearby areas. What I wish to emphasise is the management of the state of commerce, which may be the *fil rouge* that can help us to understand the rise and fall of kingdoms throughout ASA history.

Once again, at first sight inscriptions seem disappointing: none of the numerous dedicatory inscriptions located in the temples of South Arabia seems to have been commissioned by a merchant. In inscriptions the privileged topics deal with land possessions and wars, not commerce. Nevertheless, it is not the immediate content of texts that is significant, but their numerous 'indirect' data.

In the kingdom of Maʿin a specific typology of texts is created to make the wives of Minaean men (who traded in faraway lands) part of Minaean society.

The same distribution of public texts along ASA history constitutes direct evidence of the geographical areas where in specific periods a state is reinforced or created. It is certainly not by chance that the beginning of ASA history counted the highest number of public texts in the Jawf: this was the region from which caravans left to travel northbound. The development of trade by sea provided, in my opinion, a historical justification for the formation of a state on the southern plateau in the first century BC.

This statement is supported by the edition of new texts, where by chance in the history of ASA epigraphy citations concerning faraway places multiplied: Rome, Nabataea, Ionia, Palmyra, and Petra with whose peoples the ancient South Arabians were in contact.

Preliminary remarks

I left out notes on purpose. I preferred to give my narrative a flowing and unitary form in order for the reader to get an overall idea of the sheer wealth of the ASA epigraphic *corpus*, upon which I have dedicated myself for many years.

All cited inscriptions are present in the on-line archive DASI (<http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it>). Anyone who wishes to find more information can find all the materials they need there.

I chose to add an appendix with texts and the translations of two large inscriptions from the beginning of the 7th century. The matter of historical consistency, and elements similar to the Levant epigraphy have been em-

phased in a recent article by George Hatke (Hatke 2015). But these two texts deserve, in my opinion, a new complete edition.

I added (probably too often) vowels to the names of the tribes and places still attested in Arabia and, in the easiest way possible, the names of the kings and of the gods.

In order to keep a narrative tone, I thought it better for the reader not to retain all proper names in their unpronounceable sequence of consonants. But, in other cases, I did not add vowels to proper names. We do not know their vocalisation, and a heavy ‘Arabization’ would have been historically inaccurate.

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While this work was in print a book by Norbert Nebes came out:

N. Nebes, *Der Tatenbericht des Yaṭaʿamar Watar bin Yakrubmalik aus Ṣirwāḥ (Jemen). Zur Geschichte Südarabiens im frühen 1. Jahrtausend vor Christus*. Mit einem archäologischen Beitrag von Iris Gerlach und Mike Schnelle. (Epigraphische Forschungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel, 7). Tübingen-Berlin: Wasmuth Verlag.

Chapter 1

GENERAL REMARKS

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary to the formation of new states in the Levant area, at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC in south-western Arabia, in the region that today corresponds to the Republic of Yemen, written and archaeological sources have attested the birth of cities and the formation of state organization.

The desert and the sea protected ASA kingdoms from the invasions of hostile armies, paving the way for the birth of a long history of events: from the end of the 2nd millennium BC up to the 6th century AD. ASA culture evolved and changed through time, also welcoming influences from abroad without losing its unique distinctive traits.

The subdivision of ancient South Arabia into four main peoples dates back to Eratosthenes, cited in the *Geographicon* by Strabo:

The extreme part of the country, above-mentioned is occupied by the four largest tribes; by the Minaeans, on the side towards the Red Sea, whose largest city is Carna or Carnana; next to these, by the Sabaeans, whose metropolis is Mariaba; third, by Cattabanians, whose territory extends down to the straits and the passage across the Arabian Gulf, and whose royal seat is called Tamna; and, farthest toward the east, the Chatramotitae, whose city is Sabata (*Geographicon* XVI, 4.2).

This subdivision perfectly corresponds to the political and linguistic reality of Southern Arabia in the 1st millennium BC: Maʿīn, Sabaʿ, Qatabān, Ḥaḍramawt are the main kingdoms and the Minaic (MIN), Sabaic (SAB),

Qatabanic (QAT) and Hadramitic (HAD) are the four languages that make up the South-Arabian linguistic family.

Other kingdoms are known in the long ASA history: e.g. the reign of Awsān, the reign of Sama‘ī, but the written documentation for these reigns is respectively in QAT and in SAB.

The four main ASA “nations”, identifiable by the language used in written documentation, are indeed those mentioned by Eratosthenes.

Between the end of the 2nd millennium and the beginning of the 1st millennium BC – between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age – the Levant and the eastern Mediterranean areas went through important cultural and political changes.

Different state structures in terms of organisation and ideology of power were established in these areas in comparison with those that characterised the preceding period. States developed new technologies, and adopted a new way of writing – the alphabetical script – in their everyday texts and in public texts.

Despite the fact that the reigns of south-western Arabia participated in these changes, the study of their history remained marginalized within the more general studies on the states of the Iron period in the ancient Near East.

The long history of ASA culture, its documents, its artistic taste are a field of research of a small number of scholars, and certainly they are not well known to a wider public.

In our collective memory there still lies an equally well-known and historically inconsistent character: the Queen of Saba’.

In the first book of Kings (1 R 10, 1-13) it is narrated that a queen from the city of Saba’ arrives in Jerusalem to meet king Solomon, tests his fame of being a wise man and visits his kingdom, governed with justice, and so rich and wealthy is it that its fame reached the farthest corners of the world. The queen arrives with rich gifts, camels bearing spices, 120 gold pieces, precious stones, and then she leaves, firm in her conviction that the king of Israel is rich and wise.

Of course, the text should not be taken as a reliable story, it does not attest the existence of a woman who reigned in Saba’, it is simply a story whose main objective is to celebrate the golden age of the history of Israel and the greatness of its god.

Many stories, legends, and art masterpieces come from this short story; so much so that the Queen of Saba’ belongs to our repository of shared knowledge. The queen was to be used by the Fathers of the Church as a

metaphor for the church that recognises the authority of Christ; she was to become a part of the *Legend of the True Cross* (fig. 1); until, in more recent times, she became an exemplary of the Oriental female art of seduction.



FIGURE 1 - San Francesco, Arezzo: Piero della Francesca, *Queen of Saba' and King Solomon* (detail), from the *Legend of the True Cross*.