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Arabian Merchants in Judah

Abstract

Archaeological and epigraphic traces of ancient South-Arabian trade with the Middle East go back to the early 8th century B.C. One of the caravan routes, going eventually through the oasis of Taima, reached Tell el-Kheleifeh, at the outskirts of present-day Aqaba, and continued northwards, also to Jerusalem and to Samaria, or to the north-west, through Khirbet 'Ar'ara (Aroer) and Tell as-Seba (Tel Beersheva) to Gaza and Egypt. South-Arabian inscriptions from the 7th century B.C. found at Jerusalem, as well as the knowledge of the role played by Arabian queens in the Assyrian period, may explain the origins of the story-tale of I Kings 10, 1–13 reporting the visit of a nameless queen of Sheba to Jerusalem. She got different names in later traditions, but not the one of Gaḥimat, the first known queen of Sheba at the end of the 8th century B.C., whose inscription from the Al-'Aql gorge is briefly commented upon in the article. Besides, a stamp found at Beitīn reveals the presence of traders from Hadhramaut and a religious centre was established very likely by men from Taima at Arad, at the southern edge of the Judaeon Highland, in an area where North-Arabian names seem to appear as well, also in the Book Genesis 23.

The short story-tale of I Kings 10, 1–13 reports the visit of a nameless queen of Sheba to the king of Jerusalem, who originally was nameless as well, like the characters of such tales, initially handed down by oral transmission.¹ The king got a name when a summary of the story was inserted in the Solomonic cycle of I Kings to fill the blank space corresponding to the period of Solomon's reign in the 10th century B.C. Judah was then such an outlying country that no town or village of its highland was mentioned in

¹ H. Gunkel, *Das Märchen im Alten Testament*, Tübingen 1921, pp. 36, 160–161.

the topographic list of Shoshenq I, which refers instead to the Beersheba Valley with the “Lowland of the Ruler” (*Š-b-p3-r-t n G-b-r-i*),² probably the area of Khirbet el-Mšāš.

The story-tale obviously cannot go back to the 10th century B.C., but it was known as early as the 6th or 5th century B.C., when it has been incorporated in the Solomonic cycle of I Kings. This is the oldest written form of the legend, the development of which went unabated on for several centuries. In fact, the story has been much elaborated in Jewish, Arab, and Ethiopian tradition,³ perhaps preserving some original colour and charm of its oral versions. The Queen of Sheba was first named Nikaulis by Josephus Flavius, who thought that she was ruling over Egypt and Ethiopia.⁴ Instead, in Arabic literature, her name is given as Bilqīs, celebrated already in pre-Islamic poetry quoted by Nashwān ibn Sa‘īd. Ethiopian tradition goes a step further and attributes a great importance to the marriage of Solomon and Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, whose son was King Menelik I. The long version of the legend is found in *Kebra nagast*, “Glory of Kings”, written in the 13th century to glorify the newly restored royal house, which claimed to trace its ancestry back to Menelik I.

The origins of the legend should probably be looked for in some reminiscence of trade relations between South Arabia and the Levant, attested as early as the end of the 9th or the beginning of the 8th centuries B.C.

The first and from a chronological point of view most important proof of trade links between Yemen and Palestine in Iron Age II are the two South-Arabian monograms incised on two perfectly joining fragments of a large jar found by Nelson Glueck in the course of his excavations at Tell el-Kheleifeh in 1938–1940.⁵ When recording this discovery thirty years later, Nelson Glueck wrote: “Belonging also to the Edomite city of Period IV were fragments of a large jar which was probably used for transporting incense and spices from Arabia. On two of its fragments were incised the first South Arabic letters of the Minaean script thus far discovered in a controlled excavation in greater Palestine”.⁶

Glueck calls this script ‘Minaean’, following Gonzague Ryckmans. The latter, when publishing the inscribed fragments in 1939, qualified the inscription as Minaean,⁷ obviously by reference to the trading settlement at Al-‘Ula, ancient Dedan. However, we know today that the specifically Minaean trade activities in the Near East cover only

² *Reliefs and Inscriptions at Karnak*. Vol. 3. *The Bubastite Portal* (OIP 74), Chicago 1954, Nos. 73–74. Cf. E. Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan in the Iron Age. Historical and Topographical Researches* (OLA 153), Leuven 2006, pp. 99–130, in particular p. 116.

³ E.G. Stiegner, *Die Königin von Saba’ in ihren Namen. Beitrag zur Vergleichenden semitischen Sagenkunde und zur Erforschung des Entwicklungsganges der Sage* (Dissertationen der Universität Graz 44), Graz 1979, with bibliography on pp. 186–208. See further P. Marrassini, rev. in *BiOr* 65 (2008), col. 798–810.

⁴ Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities* VIII, 6, 2.

⁵ E. Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan*, pp. 384–386 with former literature.

⁶ N. Glueck, *Transjordan*, in D.W. Thomas (ed.), *Archaeology and Old Testament Study*, Oxford 1967, pp. 429–453, quotation from p. 442.

⁷ G. Ryckmans, *Un fragment de jarre avec caractères minéens à Tell el-Kheleifeh*, in *RB* 48 (1939), pp. 247–249, Pl. VI; *RÉS* 4918 bis.

a period roughly coextensive with the Ptolemaic age – fourth to second centuries B.C. They date therefore from much later times than the archaeological context of the Tell el-Kheleifeh fragments, viz. the 8th/7th century B.C., corresponding to an early stage of the Sabaean archaic period, best represented today by the inscriptions from Wadi Yalā, in Yemen. The Sabaean archaeological complex discovered there by the Italian Archaeological Mission led by Alessandro de Maigret leaves little doubt that the oldest Sabaean monumental inscriptions go back to the 8th century B.C.⁸ The fifth-century dating of such texts, as proposed by late Jacqueline Pirenne,⁹ cannot be upheld any longer. With the discovery of Yalā, some 30 km. south-west of Mārib and a hundred km. east of Ṣan‘ā’, a new Sabaean city has come to light. At Yalā and in its surroundings, almost forty inscriptions from the early archaic period have been found on the sites of the Al-‘Aql gorge (Ṣi‘b al-‘Aql), of Al-Ġafna, and of the city of Yalā / Ad-Durayb. Five inscriptions from Yalā are monumental texts, carved on stone, while the other are inscriptions carefully and nitidly engraved on rock, in monumental characters. The ceramic typology would place the end of the Wadi Yalā sites around 600 B.C. and their main development at the end of the 8th and in the 7th centuries B.C.

Twenty-seven short inscriptions are engraved on rock in the Al-‘Aql gorge. All the epigraphs refer to a particular type of events: royal ritual hunts aimed at obtaining rain, just like the ibex hunting which is still performed today by tribes in Hadhramaut.¹⁰ The rite carried out by the sovereigns of Sheba and their suite was called ‘hunting the game of ‘Athtar and the game of Kurūm’. This game was the gazelle, regarded as the symbol of ‘Athtar who was a god providing water in the form of rain and irrigation. Kurūm is known to be his hypostasis,¹¹ probably responsible for the impounding reservoirs and

⁸ A. de Maigret (ed.), *The Sabaean Archaeological Complex in the Wādī Yalā*, Rome 1988. The abbreviations AQ and Y refer respectively to the Al-‘Aql gorge and to the city of Yalā. The Sabaean pottery from Yalā was published by A. de Maigret in “Arabia” 1 (2003), pp. 89–96, 217–244, Pls. 12–39. It is dated from ca. 800–600 B.C.

⁹ J. Pirenne, *La Grèce et Saba. Une nouvelle base pour la chronologie sud-arabe*, Paris 1955; ead., *Paléographie des inscriptions sud-arabes I. Des origines jusqu’à l’époque himyarite*, Brussel 1956; ead., *Le royaume sud-arabe de Qatabān et sa datation d’après l’archéologie et les sources classiques, jusqu’au Périple de la Mer Érythrée* (Bibliothèque du Muséon 48), Louvain 1961.

¹⁰ A.F.L. Beeston, *The Ritual Hunt. A Study in Old South Arabian Religious Practice*, “Le Muséon” 61 (1948), pp. 183–196; J. Ryckmans, *La chasse rituelle dans l’Arabie du Sud ancienne*, in: *Al-Bahit. Festschrift Joseph Henninger* (Studia Instituti Anthropos 28), St. Augustin bei Bonn 1976, pp. 258–308; R.B. Serjeant, *South Arabian Hunt*, London 1976, cf. W. Heimpel, rev. in *BiOr* 42 (1985), col. 710–719; A.F.L. Beeston, *The Ṣayhadic Hunt at Ṣi‘b al-‘Aql*, in: *Études sud-arabes. Recueil offert à Jacques Ryckmans* (PIOL 39), Louvain-la-Neuve 1991, pp. 49–57; J. Ryckmans, *Rites du paganisme de l’Arabie méridionale avant l’islam*, in: *Académie Royale de Belgique. Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques*, 6th ser., 4 (1993), pp. 125–142 (see pp. 137–142); id., *Sacrifices, offrandes et rites connexes en Arabie du Sud pré-islamique*, in: J. Quaegebeur (ed.), *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (OLA 55), Leuven 1993, pp. 355–380 (see pp. 373–376).

¹¹ W.W. Müller, *KRWM im Lichte einer neuentdeckten sabäischen Jagdinschrift aus der Oase von Mārib*, in: *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen* 3 (1986), pp. 101–107; id., *The Meaning of Sabaic KRWM*, in: M. Ibrahim (ed.), *Arabian Studies in Honour of Mahmoud Ghul*, Wiesbaden 1989, pp. 89–96.

channels, as the etymology *krw* of his name ‘digger’ suggests. Earth embankments were indeed required to store water in the rainy season for the purpose of providing it through apposite channels in dry weather.¹²

Several inscriptions of the Al-‘Aql gorge contain three words that appear for the first time in Sabaic. One is the verb *s³’k*, used in the 3rd pers. fem. *s³’kt* when its subject is queen Gaḥimat (AQ/17). It is usually followed by *w-ṣyd*, ‘and hunted’. Several etymologies have been proposed for *s³’k*, but they are unconvincing.¹³ I would suggest to relate it to Egyptian *ś3q*, ‘to gather’, ‘to crowd together’, and translate it by ‘entrap’.¹⁴ This would imply a method of startling game by firing the bush and trapping the animals, as was formerly done by African natives. When a herd was discovered, a large circle surrounding it was fired and the entrapped animals, crowded together, bewildered by the flames and blinded by the smoke, would be unable to escape. True, *q : k* is no regular correspondence between Egyptian and Semitic, but it occurs most likely in *qrr : kll*, ‘whole offering’, ‘burned offering’,¹⁵ in *q3r.t/qr.t : kl*, ‘bolt’,¹⁶ and in *qpr/qwpr : kpr*, ‘henna’.¹⁷

Two words that occur frequently in the inscriptions from Wadi Yalā and were previously unknown are *’rydy w-dnm*, attested both in this sequence and in the reverse order, and also separately. These are probably place names, as suggested by a monumental inscription from Yalā, where *b-’rydy* (Y/3) should mean ‘in Aryuday’. The vocalization is of course tentative and amounts to a guess.

The leaders of the hunters, mentioned in the inscriptions from the Al-‘Aql gorge, were the *muqarrib*¹⁸ Yīṭa‘amara Bayyin, son of Šumhu‘alīy, and his successor, the *muqarrib* Karib’il Watar, son of Damar‘alīy, accompanied by the Court. Considering the chronology of the Sabaean site of Wadi Yalā, the two *muqarribs* should be identified with Yīṭa‘amara and Karib’il, who have sent presents to the Assyrian kings Sargon II and Sennacherib towards the end of the 8th and in the early years of the 7th centuries B.C.¹⁹

¹² J. Pirenne, *La maîtrise de l’eau en Arabie du Sud antique. Six types de monuments techniques* (MAIBL, n.s. 2), Paris 1977, with the rev. by A.G. Loundine in BiOr 36 (1979), pp. 373–375.

¹³ J. Ryckmans, *Sacrifices*, pp. 374–375.

¹⁴ The Sabaic verb *s³wk*, regarded as a variant of *s³’k* by A.F.L. Beeston, *Ṣayhadic Hunt*, p. 55, has a similar sense: ‘to encompass’, ‘to encircle’. Cf. A.F.L. Beeston, M.A. Ghul, W.W. Müller, J. Ryckmans, *Sabaic Dictionary*, Louvain-la-Neuve–Beyrouth 1982, p. 139.

¹⁵ J. Quaegebeur, *L’autel-à-feu et l’abattoir en Égypte tardive*, in: J. Quaegebeur (ed.), *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (OLA 55), Leuven 1993, pp. 329–347 (see pp. 342–347).

¹⁶ W. Westendorf, *Koptisches Handwörterbuch*, Heidelberg 1965–77, p. 61.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 67, 510.

¹⁸ The *muqarrib* was the head of the federation of Sabaean tribes in archaic period. The different patronymics of Yīṭa‘amara and of Karib’il, who seems to have succeeded Yīṭa‘amara, indicate that the function was not hereditary. The *muqarribs* might be compared therefore, at least to a certain extent, with the ‘Judges’ of ancient Israel, who were the heads of the Israelite amphictyony about the 11th century B.C.

¹⁹ N. Nebes, *Ita‘amar der Sabäer. Zur Datierung der Monumentalinschrift des Yīṭa‘amar Watar aus Širwaḥ*, ‘Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy’ 18 (2007), pp. 25–33, identifies *It-a‘-am-a-ra* of Sargon II’s inscriptions (A. Fuchs, *It‘amar*, in: H.D. Baker [ed.], *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* II/1, Helsinki 2000, p. 587) with Yīṭa‘amar Watar mentioned in the monumental inscription from Širwaḥ, about 45 km. west of Mārib. He dates him ca. 715 B.C. and Karib’il ca. 685 B.C.

The shape of the monograms of the fragments from Tell el-Kheleifeh corresponds very well to the script of the Wadi Yalā inscriptions. Their date and palaeography belong therefore to a period of Sabaean history characterized by widespread diplomatic and, no doubt, commercial relations. The two monograms consist of the combined letters *l+s^l* and *h+*', perhaps followed by another monogram on the lost part of the jar. Their meaning is so far unclear, but they may refer to the proprietor of the jar and to its contents. The possibilities are plenty, but any proposal can only be a guess.

The period of the 8th/7th century B.C. is also the earliest historically plausible time, when a Sabaean caravan with a 'queen' of Sheba could have reached Jerusalem, bringing a great abundance of spices (I Kings 10, 1–10.13).²⁰ North-Arabian queens are known from Neo-Assyrian sources,²¹ but a queen of Sheba, wife of Yīṭa'ʿamara, the *muqarrib* contemporary of Sargon II, is mentioned in one of the inscriptions from the Al-ʿAql gorge, which records the participation of queen Gaḥimat in the ritual hunting:²²



'lt / s³'kt / Gḥmt
 dt / byt / Yṭ'ʿmr
 'mthw / 'rydy / wdnm

'These (gazelles) entrapped Gaḥimat,
 related (by marriage) to the family of Yīṭa'ʿamara,
 his consort, (at) Aryuday and Danam'.

²⁰ The story of the Qur'ān (Sura XXVII, 22–45) is not based on the biblical text of I Kings 10, 1–10.13; II Chron. 9, 1–9.12, but on *Targum Sheni* to Esther 1, 3: A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic* IVA, Leiden 1968, pp. 176–178, based on MS. British Museum Or. 2375. Another manuscript was used by B. Grossfeld, *The Targum Sheni to the Book of Esther: A Critical Edition Based on MS. Sassoon 282 with Critical Apparatus*, Brooklyn 1994. For an interesting interpretation of the Qur'ānic parable, see V. González, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, London 2001, pp. 28–33; O. Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics. An Introduction*, Edinburgh 2004, pp. 132–136.

²¹ N. Abbot, *Pre-Islamic Arab Queens*, in *AJSL* 58 (1941), pp. 1–22; E. Lipiński, *The Aramaeans: Their Ancient History, Culture, Religion* (OLA 100), Leuven 2000, pp. 79–80, with references to the sources.

²² A. de Maigret (ed.), *Wādī Yalā*, Pl. 45: AQ/17.

Gahimat bears two titles: *dt byt Yt'mr* and *'mt Yt'mr*. The first title, 'the one of the house,' means 'related by marriage to the family of Yita'amara.' A woman related by marriage to a clan is designated by the phrase *dt byt*, where *byt* refers to the family of her husband.²³ The second title indicates that *'mt* designates the wife in higher society. The *m* in *'mt* is damaged but the traces do not allow the reading *'tt*, 'woman.' This is an important fact, because it confirms the use of *'mt* in the sense of 'wife' in Ammonite, Phoenician, and Hebrew, always in relation to persons of a fairly high status. In all these cases one can hardly speak of 'a secondary wife',²⁴ although the Old Assyrian *amtum* was probably a wife of second rank.²⁵

The mention of the wife of a *muqarrib* as active participant in the Sabaean royal hunt towards the end of the 8th century B.C. provides an important historical evidence of the position of the queen in ancient Sheba, just as in North-Arabia, as we know from the Annals of Assyrian kings. The biblical story of the visit of the queen of Sheba fits therefore a well attested frame of the ancient Arabian society, as known in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.

If we have no material or epigraphic proof that a 'queen' of Sheba visited Jerusalem in the 8th/7th century B.C., the discovery of four potsherds with South-Arabian letters and monograms in the excavations of the City of David shows at least that Sabaean merchants were reaching Jerusalem in the 7th century B.C.,²⁶ perhaps somewhat earlier. The potsherds were found in an archaeological context dating back to the 7th century B.C., but the inscribed jars may have been older. One can surmise that the traders were bringing 'all kind of spices,' in particular myrrh and frankincense. The fact that these inscriptions were incised on local vessels has a special importance, because it implies that Sabaean merchants were staying in Jerusalem in the 8th/7th century B.C. or were at least storing there some of their merchandise.

The Muslim village of Beitūn, situated 17 km. north of Jerusalem, does not lay on the territory of Judah, but it is located at the intersection of the north-south mountain road, along the watershed, and the east-west track leading to Jericho and to the Jordan

²³ M. Hartmann, *Die arabische Frage, mit einem Versuch der Archäologie Jemens* (Der islamische Orient. Berichte und Forschungen 2), Leipzig 1909 (reprint, 1976), p. 220; W.W. Müller, *Epigraphische Nachlese aus Haṣ, in NESE 1* (1972), pp. 75–85 (see p. 82); id., *Die angeblichen 'Töchter Gottes' im Licht einer qatabanischen Inschrift, in NESE 2* (1974), pp. 145–148 (see p. 147).

²⁴ See the somewhat outdated discussion of the question in: N. Avigad, *Bullae and Seals from a Post-Exilic Judean Archive* (Qedem 4), Jerusalem 1976, pp. 11–13.

²⁵ B. Kienast, *Altassyrisch amtum = 'Zweitfrau'*, "Altorientalische Forschungen" 35 (2008), pp. 35–52.

²⁶ Y. Shiloh, *The Material Culture of Judah and Jerusalem in Iron Age II: Origins and Influences*, in: E. Lipiński (ed.), *The Land of Israel: Cross-roads of Civilizations* (OLA 19), Leuven 1985, pp. 113–146 (see pp. 141–144); id., *South Arabian Inscriptions from the City of David, Jerusalem*, PEQ 119 (1987), pp. 9–18; M. Höfner, *Remarks on Potsherds with Incised Arabian Letters*, in: D.T. Ariel (ed.), *Excavations at the City of David 1978–1985, Vol. VI. Inscriptions* (Qedem 41), Jerusalem 2000, pp. 26–28. One can safely dismiss the claim that two of these inscriptions are Greek, as argued by B. Sass, *Arabs and Greeks in Late First Temple Jerusalem*, in: PEQ 122 (1990 [1992]), pp. 59–61.

Valley, eastwards, and to the coastal plain with the Philistine cities, westwards. Its strategic position for long-distance trade relations could not escape the attention of Arabian traders. In fact, a South-Arabian clay stamp-seal was discovered in 1957 in the course of James L. Kelso's excavations of the ancient mound.²⁷ The authenticity of the seal had been doubted in some quarters because of its uniqueness in Palestine, but nowadays we cannot suspect any longer its archaeological value and importance, the more so because the stamp found at Beitīn is paralleled by an identical clay stamp from a pre-Islamic site near Mešhed in Wadi Dū'an (Hadhramaut).²⁸ This shows that the Beitīn stamp is Hadhramitic and that Hadhramaut was the point of origin of the caravan that reached Beitīn in the 8th century B.C. Unfortunately, both stamps are incomplete and the reading of the three short lines of the Beitīn text is thus uncertain, perhaps [...H]my[n] fdn, '[...Ha]miya[n], the purchaser'.²⁹ It is regrettable that the excavation of Beitīn did not keep up with modern standards and that the archaeological report fell short of the expectations that the discovery of the Hadhramitic clay stamp at the site should have raised. Such an object could hardly be an isolated South-Arabian item. One could recall here that Hadhramaut is mentioned in Gen. 10, 26 and I Chron. 1, 20 with the correct Hebrew spelling *Hšrmwt*.

This double information provided by the Beitīn stamp-seal and by the correct biblical reference to Hadhramaut is important, because it may show that this area of ancient South Arabia was not only a source of precious spices, but that native traders were also their direct exporters. The recent discovery that many varieties of frankincense still grow in Hadhramaut³⁰ seems in fact to confirm N. Groom's argument that the trees grew not just in Dhofar, as was often assumed, but also as far west as the Wadi Ḥaḡr in Hadhramaut, even near the seacoast.

The presence of traders from Taima³¹ is documented at the southern edge of the Judaeian highland by the North-Arabian inscription yḥ, roughly scratched on the two offering dishes found in the Arad sanctuary of Strata X–IX.³² These strata must date from the first half of the 7th century B.C., characterized by Edomite pottery and Assyrian finds. The slightly different shape of ḥ in these inscriptions³³ represents the two varieties of the letter occurring precisely at Taima and in its surroundings.³⁴ These two letters are neither

²⁷ J.L. Kelso, *The Excavation of Bethel (1934–1960)* (AASOR 39), Cambridge Mass. 1968, Pl. 118.

²⁸ Th. Bent, *Southern Arabia*, London 1900, p. 436; A. Jammé, G.W. Van Beek, *The South Arabian Clay Stamp from Bethel again*, in BASOR 163 (1961), pp. 15–18.

²⁹ G.W. Van Beek, A. Jammé, *An Inscribed South Arabian Clay Stamp from Bethel*, in BASOR 151 (1958), pp. 9–16. Cf. pdy in A.F.L. Beeston *et al.*, *Sabaic Dictionary*, p. 43.

³⁰ N. Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh. A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade*, London–New York 1981, p. XIII.

³¹ For Taima, see at present: R. Eichmann, H. Schaudig, A. Hausleiter, *Archaeology and Epigraphy at Tayma (Saudi Arabia)*, in "Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy" 17 (2006), pp. 163–176.

³² E. Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan*, pp. 394–398.

³³ Photographs *ibid.*, pp. 396–397.

³⁴ F.V. Winnett, W.L. Reed, *Ancient Records from North Arabia* (Near and Middle Eastern Series 6), Toronto 1970, p. 205, Table of scripts, col. I.

Phoenician³⁵ nor Proto-Hebrew.³⁶ They just abbreviate Arabic *yad ḥaram*, ‘possession of the sanctuary,’ according to an old connotation of *yad*, ‘hand,’ still preserved in Islamic law.³⁷

One wonders whether North-Arabian traces cannot be found further to the north, at Hebron. Ephron, the proprietor of the cave of Machpelah, bears a name which is unique in Hebrew,³⁸ but occurs in a Thamudic inscription.³⁹ His ‘Hittite’ qualification is obviously the wrongly vocalized ethnic name *Hattiya*, listed by Tiglath-pileser III among Arabian tribesmen ‘dwelling on the border of the countries of the setting sun’ and bringing camels and spices as tribute.⁴⁰ The results of Magen’s investigation in the Hebron area, concluding that both Mamre and Machpelah were cultic sites built by Herod for recently converted Idumaeans,⁴¹ do not take earlier data into consideration. Even if the account of Gen. 23 on the purchase of the cave of Machpelah by Abraham hardly antedates the Persian period, the story presupposes a local tradition with various implications. As for the sacred spot of the Mamre “Terebinth” (*‘lt*), 3.5 km. north of the Machpelah cave, it seems to be mentioned already in II Kings 14, 22⁴² and fits the frame of the traditional Arab piety perfectly.⁴³

Further to the west, a small limestone object found at Tell as-Seba‘ bears the Old Arabian inscription *khn*,⁴⁴ which reveals its North-Arabian provenance. The item belongs to Stratum II, that should be dated to the 7th century B.C., the period of the *pax Assyriaca*.⁴⁵ Other objects, like the cuboid incense altars found in the same stratum, are rather connected with South Arabia. This intermingling of Taimanite and Sabaeen elements is interesting,

³⁵ This was proposed by F.M. Cross, *Two Offering Dishes with Phoenician Inscriptions from the Sanctuary of ‘Arad*, in BASOR 235 (1979), pp. 75–78.

³⁶ The alleged *kaf* of A.F. Rainey, in: Z. Herzog (ed.), *Beer-sheba II. The Early Iron Age Settlements*, Tel Aviv 1984, p. 32, quoted recently by Z. Herzog, *The Fortress Mound at Tel Arad: An Interim Report*, “Tel Aviv” 29 (2002), pp. 3–109 (see pp. 56, 58), should be dated back to the 11th century B.C.!

³⁷ O. Spies, E. Pritsch, *Klassisches islamisches Recht*, in *Orientalisches Recht*, Leiden 1964, pp. 220–343, see p. 228: ‘der Besitz schlechthin (im Sinne der römischen *detentio*) heisst *yad* (= tatsächliche Gewalt)’.

³⁸ Gen. 23, 8–17; 25, 9; 49, 29–31; 50, 13.

³⁹ F.V. Winnett, W.L. Reed, *Ancient Records*, p. 79, Thamudic inscription No. 16.

⁴⁰ E. Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan*, p. 127 with further references.

⁴¹ Y. Magen, *Mamre. A Cultic Site from the Reign of Herod*, in: G.C. Bottini, L. Di Segni, D. Chrupcala (eds.), *One Land, Many Cultures. Archaeological Studies in Honor of Stanisław Löffreda OFM*, Jerusalem 2003, pp. 245–257. Such an interpretation of Herod’s aims does not seem to convince A. Lichtenberger, *Juden, Idumäer und “Heiden”. Die herodianischen Bauten in Hebron und Mamre*, in L.-M. Günther (ed.), *Herodes und Rom*, Stuttgart 2007, pp. 59–78, in particular pp. 64–70. Cf. also I. Taxel, *Application-Decorated Bowls: A Cultural Characterisation of the Pagan and Christian Population of Jerusalem in the Late Roman and Byzantine Periods*, IEJ 57 (2007), pp. 170–186 (see pp. 182–183).

⁴² E. Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan*, p. 383.

⁴³ M. Höfner, *Die Stammesgruppen Nord- und Zentralarabiens in vorislamischer Zeit*, in: H.W. Haussig (ed.), *Götter und Mythen im Vorderen Orient*, Stuttgart 1965, pp. 407–481 (see pp. 430–431); E. Lipiński, *Sozomène II, 4 et le site de Ramat al-Halil, “Palamedes” 1* (2006), pp. 55–66 (see p. 66).

⁴⁴ L. Singer-Avitz, *Beersheba: A Gateway Community in Southern Arabian Long-Distance Trade in the Eighth Century B.C.E.*, “Tel Aviv” 26 (1999), pp. 3–75 (see pp. 50–52).

⁴⁵ E. Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan*, pp. 412–416 with references to former literature.

because it shows that the huge caravan attacked in the first half of the 8th century B.C. by Ninurta-kudurri-uṣur, the ruler of Sūkhū,⁴⁶ was not an isolated case. The parallelism of ‘convoys of Taima’ and ‘caravans of Sheba’ in Job 6, 19 echoes a reality of Iron Age II, observed and noted by the Transjordanian poet, while Psalm 72, 10, witnessing the royal ideology of the time, predicts that “kings of Sheba ... will bring their gifts” to Jerusalem.

Khirbet ‘Ar‘ara (Aroer), 20 km. south-east of Tell as-Seba‘, is another site witnessing the transit of Arabian caravans. Its wells provide excellent water and, no surprise, the excavations carried out in 1975–1982, 1987, and 1993 by A. Biran and R. Cohen uncovered there a settlement of the 8th–7th centuries B.C., extending over an area of about two hectares.⁴⁷ Half of this superficies was surrounded by an offsets / insets city-wall, comparable to the one built at Tell el-Kheleifeh in the second half of the 8th century B.C. The discovery of a cone-shaped jasper stamp-seal with the Edomite inscription *lqws*, ‘belonging to Qawsa’,⁴⁸ indicates that the settlement was in Edomite hands, Qawsa being probably its governor.⁴⁹ This is confirmed by three ostraca fragments with Edomite letters from the 8th–7th centuries B.C. The four blurred lines of the largest ostrakon do unfortunately not provide an intelligible text,⁵⁰ but another ostrakon reads *mšh*, ‘oil,’ and underneath the abbreviation *r*, perhaps for *rb*, ‘a quarter.’⁵¹ The two letters of the third ostrakon are *qd* or *qr*,⁵² apparently neither preceded nor followed by another letter, unless the latter had no downward tail, like *lamed*, ‘*ayin*, *shin*. A reading *qd[š]*, ‘sacred object,’ is thus possible. The two letters show no Edomite characteristics and could thus be Hebrew. More important is the ostrakon fragment with two South-Arabian letters,⁵³ viz. ‘*ayin* and beneath it *yōd* or the upper part of *lā*, possibly the beginning of a proper name. The South-Arabian presence at the site is also revealed by a limestone cuboid incense altar, somewhat damaged.⁵⁴ There is little doubt therefore that Khirbet ‘Ar‘ara was a resting

⁴⁶ G. Frame, *Rulers of Babylonia: From the Second Dynasty of Isin to the End of Assyrian Domination: 1157–612 BC* (Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Babylonian Periods 2), Toronto 1995, text S.O.1002.2, p. 300, col. IV, 26’–38’.

⁴⁷ References can be found in E. Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan*, p. 409.

⁴⁸ IEJ 26 (1976), p. 139, Pl. 28B; RB 84 (1977), p. 274, Pl. IXd; cf. J.R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites* (JSOT, Suppl. 77), Sheffield 1989, p. 213; P.J. King, *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion*, Louisville 1993, pp. 62–63. The upper register of the seal does not contain the letters ‘*r’r*, ‘Aroer,’ contrary to the statement of B. Becking in BiOr 53 (1996), col. 229.

⁴⁹ The same proper name occurs on an Idumaeian ostrakon: A. Lemaire, *Nouvelles inscriptions araméennes d’Idumée II*, Paris 2002, No. 168, 2.

⁵⁰ J. Naveh, *Published and Unpublished Aramaic Ostraca*, “Atiqot. English Series” 17 (1985), p. 114–121, Pls. XIX–XX (see pp. 120–121, Pl. XX, 13).

⁵¹ IEJ 27 (1977), Pl. 38D. One can safely discard the misinterpretation of A. Lemaire, *Notes d’épigraphie nord-ouest sémitique 2. Ostraca hébreux d’Aroer*, “Semitica” 30 (1980), pp. 19–20, Pl. Ib, who regards this ostrakon as a Hebrew school exercise with the Egyptian name ‘Pashhur’, and the following one as a fragment of an abecedar.

⁵² IEJ 27 (1977), Pl. 38F.

⁵³ IEJ 27 (1977), Pl. 38E; RB 85 (1978), Pl. XXVIIIc.

⁵⁴ RB 83 (1976), p. 257, Pl. XXVIIc.

place for caravans heading from Arabia towards the Mediterranean or northwards, in the direction of Jerusalem, since findings also prove that the site had connections with Judah, viz. a jar handle with a *lmlk* seal impression of Ziph and a limestone weight of four sheqels.⁵⁵ Such discoveries show that the wells of Khirbet 'Ar'ara were at the crossroads of the Iron Age II traffic between Arabia, Edom, the Mediterranean coast, and Judah. The study of the pottery from Stratum II, which is now being prepared for publication, should confirm this conclusion. Petrographic analysis performed on a tripod bowl has already shown that the clay originated in Transjordan⁵⁶ and the same origin is assumed for a goblet found at Khirbet 'Ar'ara.⁵⁷ Chronological questions are fortunately less important for the problem that concerns us, for the actual study of the pottery does not provide serious criteria in this matter: we are so far unable to define typological and chronological changes in the Edomite pottery of the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.,⁵⁸ while the high and very uncertain dating of archaeological levels in Judah and in the Negev undermines chronological considerations.

At any rate, the trade route through Khirbet 'Ar'ara and Tell as-Seba' was following an old track, which was already used in Iron Age I/IIA to transport copper from Khirbet en-Naḥās to the Beersheba Valley and to the Mediterranean. The copper production, both mining and smelting, was active in the Wadi Feinān area (Jordan) from ca. 1000 B.C. at least to the late 8th century B.C.,⁵⁹ reaching its peak when Assyria got in contact with the kingdom of Edom at the end of the 9th century B.C.⁶⁰ However, the vassalizing of Cyprus by Sargon II increased the flow of Cypriot copper to the Levant and brought about the end of the copper production at Khirbet en-Naḥās, but the trade route through Khirbet 'Ar'ara was then taken up by Arabian merchants, who changed it into an 'incense road'.

⁵⁵ RB 83 (1976), p. 257, Pl. XXVIIa.

⁵⁶ Y. Goren, in: N. Na'aman, Y. Thareani-Sussely, *Dating the Appearance of Assyrian Ware in Southern Palestine*, "Tel Aviv" 33 (2006), pp. 61–82 (see p. 69).

⁵⁷ N. Na'aman, Y. Thareani-Sussely, art. cit. (n. 56), pp. 70 and 75, No. 10.

⁵⁸ C.-M. Bennett, P. Bieńkowski (eds.), *Excavations at Tawilan in Southern Jordan*, Oxford 1995, p. 102.

⁵⁹ Since precise stratigraphy and significant pottery assemblages are so far lacking at Khirbet en-Naḥās, the chronological question can be provisionally answered only with the help of radiocarbon measurements of charcoal and wood samples, usually providing too high dates. Therefore, the chronology "from the late 12th century to the late 9th century", defended by I. Finkelstein and E. Piasezky, *Radiocarbon and the History of Copper Production at Khirbet en-Naḥās*, "Tel Aviv" 35 (2008), pp. 82–91, should be lowered.

⁶⁰ G. Weisgerber, *The Mineral Wealth of Ancient Arabia and Its Use I: Copper Mining and Smelting at Feinan and Timna – Comparison and Evaluation of Techniques, Production, and Strategies*, "Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy" 17 (2006), pp. 1–30, especially pp. 15–17. The author assumes that from the beginning of Iron Age II the rulers of what later became Edom were the dominant factor in this exceptional enterprise (p. 15).