



# The Arab nomadic people and the cultural interface between the 'Fertile Crescent' and 'Arabia Felix'

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Nomadic Arabs have been known in southern Arabia from ancient times. The first written evidence of their existence appears in a Minaean text of the sixth century BC found in a temple at Wadi ash-Shaqab, near Baraqish (Yemeni Jawf). The text describes the local community as subdivided into *ghbr* (farmers) and *'rb* (nomads) (1). Since the nomadic element appears well-established in the social context of Ma'in, one can presume that the *'rb* were present at that site from more ancient times and their relationship with the sedentaries would have been similar to that known throughout the Fertile Crescent from the time of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC).

If such behavioural and chronological correspondences between Mesopotamia and southern Arabia with respect to nomadic peoples are correct, then the Arabs could be seen as a common denominator vis-à-vis the two poles of civilisation in the Arabian peninsula. As a consequence, our perspective could be shifted to an international level and the Arab phenomenon analysed in a completely new way with respect to the history of the ancient Near East.

The 'incense caravan route' represents the means whereby the three protagonists – southern Arabia, Mesopotamia and the Arabs – interacted and reciprocally ben-

efited. One of the greatest technological innovations of historic times, the domestication of the camel and its use as a pack animal, allowed distant centres of civilisation to come into contact. Indeed, different populations that had been historically limited to distinct ecological niches because of harsh environmental conditions could finally meet. Camels represented the instrument that allowed people to overcome the division of the Arabian peninsula by a vast desert. For the first time, large-scale economic and cultural interactions developed between the Mediterranean cultures (centred in Anterior Asia) and the Erythraean cultures (centred in southwest Asia) which differed widely in customs, resources and philosophies. The enrichment associated with the caravan route not only resided in the intrinsic value of the merchandise transported but also in the socioeconomic progress resulting from this cultural interaction. It is for this reason that the nomads, although they were repeatedly confronted as a cultural threat by the Mesopotamian and South Arabian kingdoms, were at the same time respected and, ultimately, allowed to live freely until the pressure toward the 'sown' prevailed both in the north and south (2).

When the caravan route actually started

is a matter of debate, although it is obviously related to the date of the domestication of the camel (3). W.F. Albright postulated that the use of camels for caravans began in the twelfth century BC (4). However, this date appears too early to be accepted as coeval with regular use of the incense route. One of the arguments in favour of a later date for the regular use of the caravan route resides in the contemporaneous and sudden cultural change we see both in Mesopotamia and southern Arabia in the eighth century BC. Even if this new idea appears radical at the moment, we cannot exclude the possibility that the definitive establishment of both the Neo-Assyrian and Sabaean political powers was linked (even if not in an equally correspondent way) to the reciprocal economic and cultural exchanges which resulted from the new caravan route linking Mesopotamia and southern Arabia.

Our objective here is to verify this chronological hypothesis through the analysis of the available archaeological data, i.e. those coming from the ancient city-oases located along the western margin of the Peninsula, without which no long-distance trade could take place.

In Yemen South Arabian culture was established in permanent settlements by the last centuries of the second millennium BC. Based on technical similarities between South Arabian ceramics and those from the beginning of the Iron Age in Syria and Palestine (5), the twelfth century BC appears to have been an important period. In the beginning, the South Arabian centres were rather small and without defences. Cult sites were limited to sanctuaries excavated in rock walls. Writing only took the form of brief inscriptions on clay. 'Arabian protohistory' ended with the sudden appearance of great improvements, such as the town walls that enlarged and defended cities, monumental temples, great lapidary

inscriptions, stone statues and a characteristic ceramic repertoire.

Stratigraphic analysis places the beginning of this later phase in the eighth century BC. In this period the kingdoms attained a level of statehood. Around 700 BC, the *mukarrib* Karib'il Watar bin Dhamar 'Ali (to be identified, most likely, with the Karibilu cited in the Annals of Sennacherib) was already the head of a real 'Sabaean Empire' extending from the Indian Ocean and Hadramawt to the 'Asir and the Ethiopian high-plateau. It is possible that, in the eighth century, some South Arabian commercial centres were already established in the north, in the area of Dedan and Tayma, which would explain the references of both the King of Sukhu (6) and of Tiglathpileser III regarding the Sabaean people.

Najran is the first oasis where the caravan stopped after leaving Yemen. A systematic surface collection and an exploration within the town walls carried out by an American mission in 1980-82, together with carbon-14 determinations, have dated the earliest occupation of the town to 'between the middle and the beginning of the 1st millennium BC' (7). Such dating relies also on stratigraphic comparisons with the South Arabian site of Hajar Bin Humayd, the date of which has now been confirmed (8). The relative antiquity of the first settlement at Najran is also implied by the plan of the city walls. Indeed, the irregular course of the towers attests to the ancient custom (documented at sites such as Yala, Hinu az-Zurayr, Janadilah) of defending the town by juxtaposing and joining with short walls the houses at the outer limits of the settlement (9). This custom preceded the construction of classic town walls which probably began around the end of the eighth century BC.

Due to the lack of stratigraphic data for Qaryat al-Faw, it is not known whether the branch of the caravan route that joined the

oasis of Najran to eastern Arabia was functioning during this early period. The Ptolemaic references to Laththa (Tathlith), Thumala (Bishah), Tabala (Tabalah) and Carna (Qurn al-Manazil) are too late for our discussion and are not supported by confirmed archaeological evidence. Similarly, there are no archaeological traces of Fadak (Padakku according to Nabonidus), possibly the centre of a secondary route towards the Yamama region (Riyadh) if it can be identified with the station of Futuk (not far from Mecca) cited by the Arab historian al-Hamdani (10). Moreover, because of modern settlements we lack archaeological evidence for two important oases, Yathrib and Khaybar, both of which are mentioned in the Harran inscription of Nabonidus.

By comparison, the information available on Khuraybah (Dedan), Tayma (Tema') and Qurayyah (north-west of Tabuk) is more complete. The systematic collection of ceramics at these important archaeological sites by British and American expeditions in the 1980s has generated intense debate. Although this debate has at times acquired the tone of an epistemological polemic between British typologists and American anthropologists it has, nonetheless, succeeded in deepening the analysis of the data collected (11). Here are, in brief, the results of such analyses. A common repertoire of pottery types links both Tayma and Qurayyah. This material, defined as 'Midianite', is found in the Sinai, Negev and Transjordan regions, but appears to have had its centre of diffusion (hence its name) in northwestern Arabia. It seems to appear first during the thirteenth century BC and to disappear around 850 BC. From this date there is an interruption in the occupation of Qurayyah, lasting until the Hellenistic era. In contrast, Tayma displays a new type of ceramic ('bichrome ware') which attests to the continuous occupation of the city following the end of

the 'Midianite' ware phase. Toward the end of the fifth century BC a third type of ceramic appears at Tayma, with similarities with the wares collected at Khuraybah.

In conclusion, American archaeologists speculate that there was continuity in the settlement of Tayma from the Late Bronze age onwards (12). However, they also infer a cultural change beginning in the eighth century BC which is archaeologically attested not only by ceramics, but by the stratigraphic record in the southern sector of the city, the town walls, the fortified buildings of Qasr al-Ablaq and Qasr ar-Radim and the cultal complex of Qasr al-Hamra (13).

No archaeological excavation has been undertaken at the great ruin of Dedan (Khuraybah) and we therefore do not know its stratigraphic sequence. However, although the surface finds have been chronologically assigned, with some uncertainty, to the sixth century BC (14), we cannot exclude the presence of more ancient settlements, hypothesised by both W.F. Albright (15) and A. Musil (16). The accepted chronology, based on epigraphic evidence, tends to assign to Dedan a more recent origin, but the latest examination of the evidence collected at the oasis of al-'Ula suggests a much earlier period of occupation (17).

It is possible that an important bifurcation of the caravan route led from Yathrib, through the basin of Wadi Rimah/Wadi al-Batin, to Mesopotamia. However, the most important nodes must have been Dedan and Tayma. These centres were separated by approximately 100 km and it is possible that they competed as crossroad cities (the inscriptions of Jabal Ghunaym, near Tayma, are consistent with this interpretation) to divert commerce either towards the Mediterranean coast or towards Mesopotamia. Unfortunately, the most important oasis on this northeastern leg of the caravan route, the oasis of Dumat al-Jandal (modern al-Jawf),

has not been shown archaeologically to correspond to Biblical Dumah and the Adummatu of Sennacherib. Neither the Anglo-American expedition of 1976 (18) nor the Saudi excavations of 1985–86 (19) recovered traces of any settlement predating the Nabataean era. We must conclude, therefore, that either the archaeological data are at present insufficient or that the identification of Dumat al-Jandal (and its famous fortress Marid) with ancient Adummatu is wrong (20). It should not be forgotten that not far from the site, in the Kaf region of Wadi Sirhan, the same Anglo-American expedition made the 'surprising' discovery of several important Iron Age sites (21) where we could look for a possible alternative to the identification of Adummatu.

Archaeological data from the oases located along the western limit of the Arabian peninsula are scarce. The sites are all in Saudi Arabian territory, and this country at the moment has suspended all archaeological research. However, on the basis of a few American and British visits in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Saudis were more open to exploring their archaeological heritage, we can infer that the Late Bronze tradition in the area of Madian (with centres in Timna and Qurayyah, up to Tayma), was followed by an Iron Age with settlements extending to all oases from Tayma and Dedan (Dumah is not yet attested) down to Najran. The archaeological evidence, particularly from Tayma, demonstrates that this evolution occurred towards the beginning of the eighth century BC.

As mentioned above, Iron Age settlements in southern Arabia (with specific South Arabian ceramics) can be found from the end of the second millennium BC, probably from the twelfth century BC. In their protohistoric phase, the people of southern Arabia were able to develop a successful way of life based on agricultural production thanks to the development of

innovative hydraulic technologies. Subsequent South Arabian communities grew and developed from this base. We must stress this concept, even at the risk of 'destroying a myth', as Nigel Groom used to say (22). The power and the richness of Arabia Felix did not derive from commercial activities, as the classical literature simplistically suggests, but originated rather in the fact that its people were skilled farmers, exceptionally gifted in creating and managing highly specialised irrigation systems. The Marib dam is the most remarkable example of those skills. Only after this agricultural organisation succeeded in providing a complete social, economic and political integration of society did the South Arabians take advantage of commerce as a means for advancement. The commercial option could not have been afforded if the South Arabian population had not already possessed such a level of development as to be able to present themselves as important partners for exchange with the north. This developmental threshold was reached in the eighth century BC when, evidently, the nomads could supply pack animals and the city-oases could bloom along the route of the incense caravans. From the integration of these two economical bases – one local and agricultural and the other external and commercial – the South Arabian states were formed and their historical influence was achieved. At the same time, the northern states benefited from the introduction of economic and cultural resources originating in the distant southern world. The great Arabian commercial route could not have existed if any one of its protagonists – northern states, southern states or nomadic peoples – had not embraced the need for 'international' commerce. After centuries of separate and independent evolution, this convergence of intent was reached in the eighth century BC.



The present discussion appears to open up new and stimulating ways of approaching South Arabian studies, since it offers new elements confirming the archaeological hypothesis according to which southern Arabia (and not northwestern Arabia) was the primary locus of the Sabaean people; Assyrian studies, since it suggests that Southern Arabia should be included among the historic factors that influenced the development and consolidation of the states of the Fertile Crescent; and Arabian studies, because it suggests that the history of the Near East must be thoroughly reconsidered, taking into account the influence and contributions of the first Arabs (23).

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23. This article was presented as a paper at the XLIV Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale de Venise in July 1997.

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