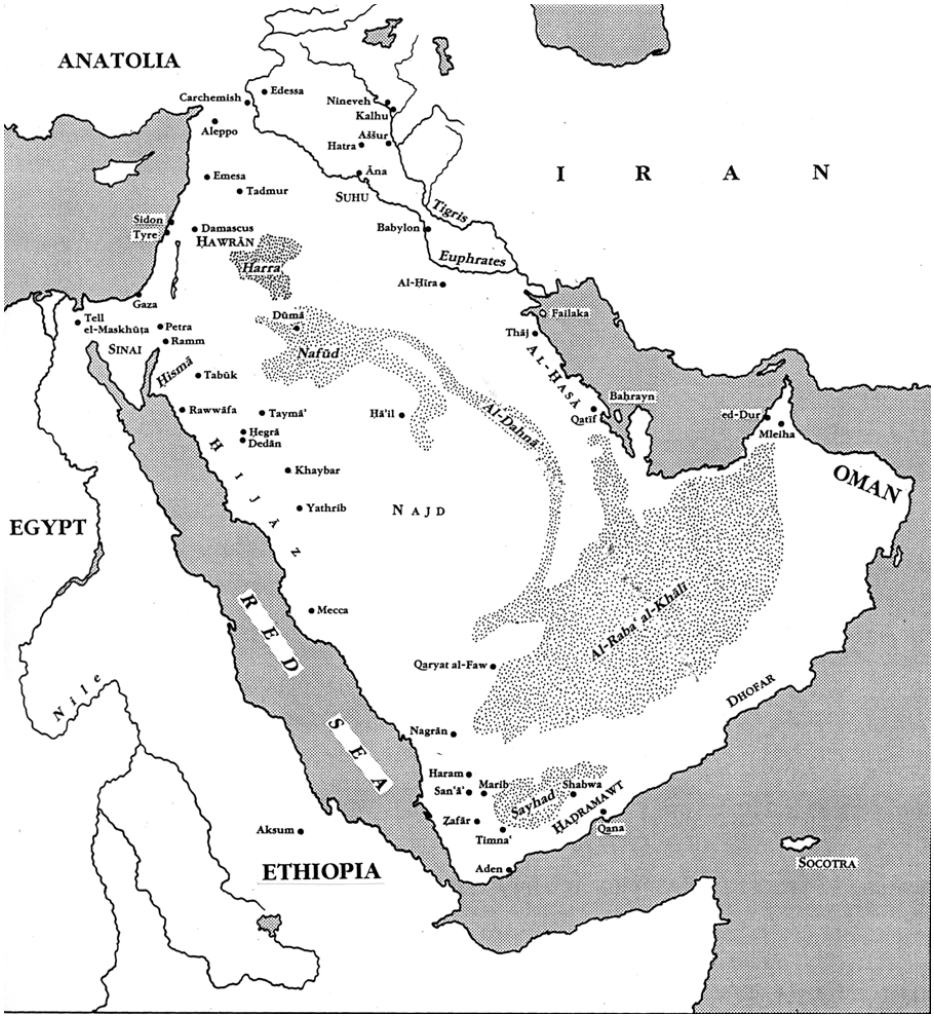
An Overview to Ancient Arabia

1. Multiple Arabias

Ancient sources, in particular the Assyrian Annals and the Greek and Roman historians and geographers, defined ‘Arabia’ as anywhere inhabited by peoples called ‘Arabs’. They applied this term to populations with very different ways-of-life in a wide variety of areas, and it seems likely that only a combination of a recognizably common language and certain common cultural traits could have defined them all as belonging to the same group.



From the 8th century BC, the Assyrians and Babylonians recorded Arabs living (from east to west) in eastern Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Iran, settled in large numbers in Babylonia, in the Syrian Jazīra (between the Tigris and Euphrates), on the slopes of the Anti-Lebanon mountains (between modern Lebanon and Syria), in north and north-west Arabia, and in Sinai.

By the 6th century, the Achaemenid Persian empire recognized an Arab enclave in Gaza and its hinterland, and a century later Herodotus regarded 'Arabia' as being most of eastern Egypt, between the Nile and the Red Sea. Xenophon (c. 430–c. 354 BC) found 'Arabias' in northern Syria and northern and central Mesopotamia, while Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) encountered Arabs in the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains, Gaza, Sinai, the eastern Nile Delta, and eastern Egypt, as well as at the head of the Persian Gulf, and even in central Iran.

This does not mean that the total populations of any of these areas were considered to be 'Arabs', but that there were Arab populations in them of sufficiently significant size and importance to be recognized by outsiders.
Thus, for instance, while in the early centuries AD there were quite considerable Arab communities in Southern Arabia (modern Yemen), and Graeco-Roman geographers mistakenly called it *Arabia Felix*, the majority indigenous populations in the kingdoms of that region did not regard themselves as Arabs.

The ways-of-life of these populations varied considerably. In many places they were sedentary farmers, in others they had self-governing cities, in others they formed merchant colonies within cities, in yet others they had extensive kingdoms (e.g. the Nabataeans and those in northern Mesopotamia), while others were nomads. Thus, from the early 1st millennium BC when we first hear of 'Arabs', they occupied increasingly large areas throughout the Fertile Crescent. As yet, we have no evidence of where they originated. The idea that it was necessarily from the Peninsula is an anachronistic misunderstanding, since the Peninsula only came to be called 'Arabia' par excellence from the late Hellenistic and Roman periods onwards. We do not know what, if anything, it was called by its inhabitants at that time and earlier.

In 64 BC Pompey made Syria into a Roman Province. However, the Nabataean kingdom which stretched from southern Syria to north-west Arabia and into southern Palestine, remained independent until AD 106 when it too was annexed by Rome and was renamed *Provincia Arabia*.

After this, all the inhabitants of this Province were called 'Arabs' by the Romans and it gradually became necessary to find another name for the nomads who had previously been called 'Arabs' but were not subjects of the province. For these, the term 'Saracen' (probably derived from a North Arabian word meaning 'those who migrate to the inner desert') was slowly adopted.

However, the term ‘Arab’ continued to be used of settled Arabs in regions such as the Jazīra (peninsula) and northern Mesopotamia. Thus, in AD 195, Septimius Severus fought ‘Arabs’ in northern Mesopotamia and so assumed the honorific title **Arabicus.** Eventually, however, the term ‘Saracen’ was extended to all those who had previously been called ‘Arabs’, regardless of whether they were settled or nomadic. In the period after AD 106, it is therefore important to distinguish between events in the Province of Arabia, those in the Arabian Peninsula, and those affecting Arabs in other places.

The Geography and the Inhabitance of the Arabian Peninsula

a. The north, west, centre, and east of the Arabian Peninsula

What we call the 'Arabian Peninsula' has been inhabited since Paleolithic times. Recent discoveries have shown that early hominids made their way out of Africa across the bed of the Red Sea (which was almost dry at that time) and through the Arabian Peninsula into Asia, as well as via the Levant into Europe. Successive climate changes meant that over tens of thousands of years, prehistoric Man survived by adopting different ways of life, as witnessed for instance by rock-drawings of cattle in what are now desert areas and of the hunting of dromedaries in the days before the animal was domesticated.

The landmass of the Peninsula slopes gently eastward from a mountain chain along the western (Red Sea) coast to the Persian Gulf. In the south-west and, to some extent the south-east, there are extensive mountainous areas which benefit from the twice-yearly monsoon rains, which, when conserved, permit permanent irrigated agriculture. This was the basis of the prosperity of ancient Yemen and also permitted the cultivation of the frankincense tree (Boswellia sacra) primarily in Dhofar (in the south of modern Oman).

In the center, north and south-east of the Peninsula, there are scattered areas where irrigated agricultural is possible (e.g. in parts of Najd, 'Asīr, the Wādī al-Dawāsir, and Oman), and there are numerous oases across the Peninsula, some of them extremely large (e.g. Tabūk, Dadan, and Yathrib [= al-Madīna]) where permanent settled populations have for millennia practiced agriculture, horticulture, and the cultivation of huge groves of date-palms, and at different periods have developed urban societies and even kingdoms.

From the 4th millennium BC onwards, the Peninsula lay between the two great powers of the ancient Near East: Egypt on the west and Mesopotamia (Assyria and Babylonia), and later Iran, to the north-east. Most of our knowledge of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages in Arabia comes from eastern Arabia, because it is here that it has been possible to undertake archaeological work for longest.

Eastern Arabia lay between the civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley and was on the trade routes between the two. Its many prehistoric societies named after the sites where they were first identified have left large monumental tombs with communal burials and distinctive repertoires of artefacts.

In Oman, a sophisticated irrigation system called the *falaj* was developed in the Iron Age and the technology was later exported to Iran, where these tunnels were known as *qanat* [= *qanāh*]. The *falaj* brought water from springs via underground tunnels to the fields and settlements, making possible extensive agriculture in areas with little seasonal rainfall. The domestication of the dromedary which seems to have taken place in south-east Arabia around 1200–1100 BC, provided sources of rich milk products as well as beasts of burden and means of transport for settled people and for nomads.

In the last centuries BC and the early centuries AD a number of states flourished on the east coast of the Peninsula, among which the great trading city of Gerrha (exact site unidentified) was the most famous. Gerrha dominated the trade between the Indian Ocean, Mesopotamia, Yemen, and— via the Nabataeans — the Mediterranean. Several of these states minted their own coins and these show that some were ruled by women. In the north and center of the Peninsula, sedentary life was mainly concentrated in large oases. While agriculture and the cultivation of the date palm formed the basis of their economies, by the second millennium and possibly even earlier, some (e.g. Taymāʾ) had developed into urban centers, probably as a result of their positions on the trade routes. At Qurayyah, in thenorth-west, pottery has been found which seems to link it with the copper mining site of Timnaʿ in the Wādī ʿAraba (the southern extension of the Dead Sea Valley) which was controlled by the Egyptians in the 2ndmillennium BC. By the first millennium BC, the oases in the north and north-west of the Peninsula had become pivotal in the trade in frankincense and spices brought overland from Southern Arabia to Egypt, the Mediterranean (at Gaza), the Levant, Syria, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia. Already in the 8th century BC, a caravan of the people of Taymāʾ (in North Arabia) and Sabaʾ (in South Arabia) was ambushed by the Assyrian governor of Suḫu on the Euphrates for trying to avoid paying tolls.

Anxious to control the northern end of this trade, the rulers of Assyria and Babylonia launched repeated attacks against the populations (both settled and nomadic) of North Arabia, many of whom were ruled by priestess-queens based in the oasis of Dūmat (mediaeval Dūmat al-Jandal, modern al-Jawf). So important was this trade that by the mid-6th century BC, Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon (555–539 BC), chose to reside in Taymāʾ for the major part of his reign (probably 552–543 BC), having already conquered five other major oases on the trade route from the south, including Dadan (Biblical Dedān) and Yathrib (modern al-Madīna).

In Dadan, which was the site of two successive kingdoms (Dadan and Liḥyān), Minaean merchants from South Arabia, who were the major dealers in frankincense, founded a trading station.

*(The **Minaean** people were the inhabitants of the **kingdom of Ma'in** in modern-day Yemen, dating back to the 6th century BCE-150 BCE.[1] It was located along the strip of desert called Ṣayhad by medieval Arab geographers, which is now known as Ramlat Dehem.*

The Minaean people were one of four ancient Yemeni groups mentioned by Eratosthenes. The others were the Sabaeans, Ḥaḍramites and Qatabānians. Each of these had regional kingdoms in ancient Yemen, with the Minaeans in the north-west, the Sabaeans to the south-east of them, the Qatabānians to the south-east of the Sabaeans, and the Ḥaḍramites further east still.)

By the first century AD, the Nabataeans — nomadic Arabs who had settled in southern Jordan in the 3rd century BC and had taken control of the northern end of the trade route —ruled the whole of the north-west of the Peninsula and had established a city, Ḥegrā (mediaeval al-Ḥijr, modern Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ) some 20 km north of Dadan.

In the center of the Peninsula, on the north-west edge of the 'Empty Quarter', another oasis site called Qaryat Dhāt Kahl (modern Qaryat al- Faʾw) flourished between the 2nd century BC and the 5th century AD. It was the capital of the Arab tribes of Kinda, Madhḥij and Qaḥṭān.

Excavations there have revealed an extraordinarily rich and luxurious way of life, with wall-paintings, exquisite glass, bronze and stone statuary, decorative textiles, and large numbers of inscriptions. Luxury goods were imported from the Mediterranean world, Egypt, the Levant, Mesopotamia, India, South Arabia and other places.

Besides these settled cultures, there were nomadic tribes in most parts of the Peninsula from at least the 4th millennium onwards. These tribes would have lived in a symbiotic relationship with the inhabitants of the oases since each population could provide important goods needed by the other: the nomads provided the sedentaries with meat, animal transport, leather, wool and milk-products, and in return the oasis dwellers could provide, vegetables, flour, dates, wood and metal-products.

Both communities were involved in, and profited from, the south-north overland trade and therefore had a vested interest in the preservation of peace. When the Nabataeans settled in southern Jordan in the 3rd century BC, they made their capital at Reqem, called by the Greeks Petra. Even as nomads, they had been renowned for their expertise in constructing hidden cisterns in the desert to provide water throughout the year, and when they settled, they became great hydrological engineers and their conservation of the seasonal rainfall enabled them to put large areas under irrigated cultivation. The well-ordered urban society of Petra aroused the admiration of the Greek philosopher Athenodorus, who lived there for some years.

The Nabataeans dominated the northern end of the incense trade route from Southern Arabia to the Mediterranean, and, as mentioned above, worked with the merchants from the eastern

Arabian city of Gerrha in bringing spices and other luxury goods from India and beyond to the markets of the Mediterranean world. From southern Jordan they expanded their kingdom until by the end of the 1st century BC it stretched from southern Syria to north-west Arabia and included Sinai and the Negev.
In the mid-1st century AD, the last Nabataean king, Rabbel II, moved his capital from Petra to Boṣrā in southern Syria and when, on his death in AD 106, the Romans annexed the kingdom and named it *Provincia Arabia*, they retained Boṣrā as the capital. The new era of the Province was known both as the era of Boṣrā and of the Province and continued to be used in official documents until the Islamic conquests (mid-7th century AD), and by Christians until much later.

The Roman and Byzantine empires ruled the Near East for over 600 years (from 64 BC to the Islamic conquests in AD 635–640), and throughout this period their policy was dominated by the conflict with Persia/Iran. The fluctuating border between these two superpowers ran through Armenia (in what is now eastern Turkey) and the Jazīra between the Tigris and Euphrates. Parts of this region consisted of rich agricultural land and parts were desert, and there were cities on both sides of both rivers.

There was one or more settled Arab kingdoms in the northern Jazīra, and Arab communities, both settled and nomadic, further south. These were constantly caught up in the conflict between Rome and Persia.

b. Ancient South Arabia

Unlike the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, south-west Arabia appears to have been a coherent cultural sphere, which — despite many outside influences and drastic internal changes — preserved its own cultural, political, and linguistic individuality from its historical beginnings until late antiquity. By the early first millennium BC, highly developed communities had appeared in the arid deltas at the eastern fringes of the Yemeni central plateau. They used writing and had monumental architecture, and their economy was based on agriculture watered by the monsoons with at least two harvests per year.

The most important among these communities were Sabaʾ, Maʿin, Qataban and Ḥaḍramawt. Their wealth — of which Graeco-Roman authors speak when referring to *Arabia Eudaimōn* or *Arabia Felix* — was based on the trade in frankincense and other spices, and on control of large stretches of the trade route to the markets in the north.

Our first detailed insight from within South Arabia itself into its political landscape in the 1st millennium BC is found in the lengthy *Res Gestae* (or ‘Deeds’) of the **Sabaean** rulers Yithaʿʾamar Watar and Karibʾil Watar. These are the earliest reliably datable historical records from South Arabia, and indeed from the Arabian Peninsula in general. These huge inscriptions

were set up around 715 and 685 BC respectively, in the sanctuary of the principal Sabaean deity, ʾAlmaqah, at Ṣirwāḥ, close to the Sabaean metropolis of Mārib. They tell of the Sabaeans' defeat of their southern and northern neighbours and the consequent establishment of their hegemony in South Arabia.

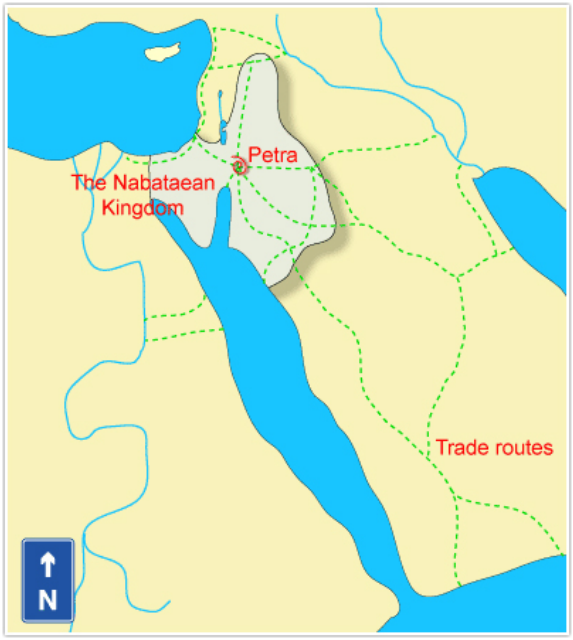
The epigraphic evidence provides only limited information on the structure and organization of societies in ancient South Arabia. The most detailed data concern the situation in the **Sabaean** heartland around Mārib and Ṣirwāḥ. At the head of society was the so-called *mukarrib* who performed the role of mediator between the principal Sabaean god, ʾAlmaqah, and the people of Sabaʾ. He was responsible for the exercise of ritual duties such as the performance of the sacred marriage and the organization of ritual banquets for ʿAthtar, the only deity venerated by all South Arabian peoples. He was in charge of the performance of ritual processions in the large temple complexes, of certain sacrifices, and of the ritual hunt. The title *mukarrib* ('unifier') probably alludes to the central political task of the Sabaean ruler, namely uniting the South Arabian cities and tribes under Sabaean sovereignty through a far-reaching system of alliances.

With the decline of Sabaean power in the 4th century BC, the title *mukarrib* passed to other kingdoms and was replaced in Sabaʾ by the term "king" (*mlk*). When, in the 4th century BC, Sabaʾ eventually relinquished its hegemony, **Qataban** managed to extend its territory to the south-west as far as Bab al-Mandab (the straits where the Red Sea meets the Indian Ocean).

Minaean merchants, who established a trading colony with its own administrative structures in Dadan (modern al-ʿUlā, in north-west Saudi Arabia), are also found in Egypt, the Levant, at Ctesiphon on the river Tigris in Mesopotamia, and even on the Greek island of Delos.

In 25 BC, the Prefect of the Roman Province of Egypt, Aelius Gallus, set out with an army of 10,000 soldiers towards South Arabia. According to the Greek geographer Strabo (64/63 BC–AD 25), when the Roman army reached the Sabaean metropolis of Mārib they besieged it for six days but could not take it. Although we lack corresponding sources from the South Arabian side, this campaign may be connected with the final disappearance of the Minaeans, with the result that the overland trade in frankincense was taken over by **the Nabataeans.**

We know that **Nabataean** merchants were in South Arabia after this from a Sabaic-Nabataean bilingual inscription found at Ṣirwāḥ which is dated to the third year of the Nabataean king Aretas IV, that is 7/6 BC. Later, due to the increasing importance of the maritime trade with India, which had already been stimulated by the Roman occupation of Egypt, the balance of power shifted in South Arabia. The few natural harbours and their access points became especially important. By this period, or even earlier, colonizers from the **Ḥaḍramawt** had established the port of Samārum (also known as 'Sumhuram', modern Khor Rori) on the coast of Dhofar close to the region where frankincense was produced, while the harbour of Qaniʾ west of modern al-Mukallā on the southern Yemeni coast, secured Ḥaḍramī access to maritime trade after the turn of the era.



From the 1st century AD onwards, the people of **Ḥimyar** in the southern highlands began to break away from Qataban and eventually emerged as a considerable power in South Arabian politics. Around the turn of the era, possibly as a result of Aelius Gallus' campaign, a coalition was formed between Sabaʾ and Ḥimyar, and from this point onwards their rulers called themselves 'kings of Sabaʾ and Dhū Raidān', the latter referring to the royal place in the Himyarite capital, Ẓafār. This coalition was ended by the rise of tribes in the highlands of northern Yemen, which replaced the royal dynasty of Sabaʾ in Mārib during the 2nd century AD.

The 2nd and 3rd centuries AD are characterized by a series of wars between a number of different protagonists. After Qataban had been absorbed by Ḥaḍramawt, a final, ephemeral, Sabaean hegemony was created through a policy of large-scale expansion by the Sabaean king Shaʾirum Awtar. His campaigns led him northwards to Qaryat al-Faʾw (see above).

In the east of Yemen, he destroyed Shabwa, the capital of the Ḥaḍramī kingdom, and Qāniʾ**,** its port for trade with India. In the west he marched against the Abyssinians settled on the Red Sea coast of Yemen. In Sanʿāʾ, he built the castle of Ghumdān, the splendour of which, even in the 10th century AD, impressed the Yemeni historian and geographer al-Hamdānī.

Large numbers of inscriptions from the 3rd century AD, by both Sabaeans and Himyarites, mention the fierce wars conducted — with varying outcomes — by the Sabaean king Ilsharaḥ Yaḥḍib and his Himyarite opponents Shammar Yuhaḥmid and Karibʾīl Ayfaʾ. Although there was no one decisive battle, towards the end of the 3rd century the Himyarites eventually emerged victorious. By the beginning of the 4th century, Yemen was united under the Himyarite king

Shammar Yuharʿish. The Himyarites composed their inscriptions in a southern Sabaic dialect, using the same script as their predecessors.

Around the middle of the 4th century AD, the first evidence of monotheism begins to appear in the Ancient South Arabian inscriptions. The deity invoked is '(god) the Lord of Heaven (and of the earth)', later also called *Raḥmānan*, 'the merciful'. This was an epithet designating the Jewish God, as the phraseology in several religious inscriptions from the following period show.

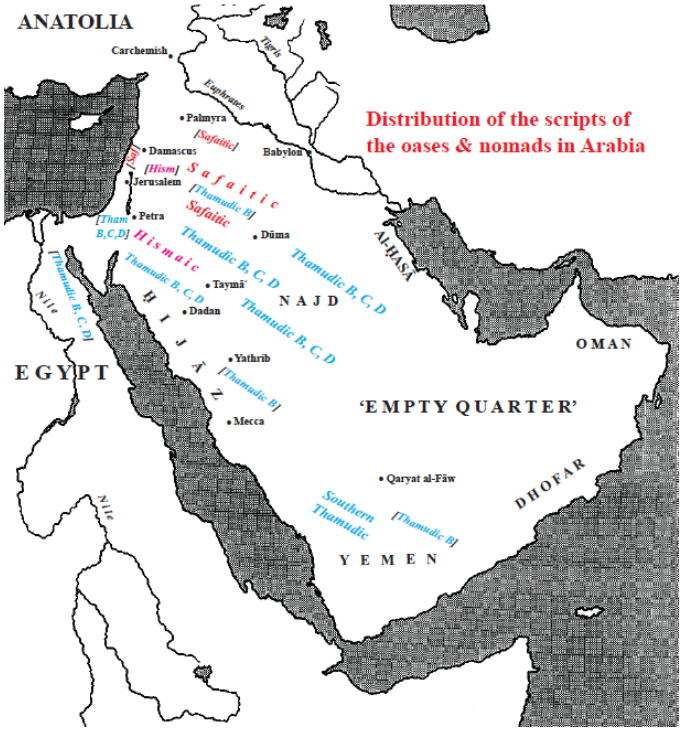
The Himyarite dynasty's conversion to Judaism was at least in part a reaction to the increasing Byzantine influence in this region, and in particular the conversion to Christianity of the Abyssinian king ʿEzānā IV in Aksum.

This adoption of different forms of monotheism gave an additional religio-political element to the conflict between the two powers on either side of the Bab al-Mandab: Ḥimyar and Abyssinia. The epigraphic evidence, however, does not reveal whether there was a continuous conflict from this time on, or a particular aggravation of the situation during the 5th century. After several campaigns, Ḥimyar under its king Abikarib Asʿad managed to extend its sphere of influence into central Arabia, and to maintain its hold through its Arab proxies the kings of Kinda and the Bedouin confederation of Maʿadd.

In the first quarter of the 6th century AD, a major conflict erupted between Ḥimyar and the Abyssinians. We are fortunate to have information about this not only from Sabaic and Ethiopic inscriptions, but also from Syriac and Greek literary sources. Immediately before this, the Himyarite dynasty appears to have been pursuing a pro-Byzantine (and thus pro- Abyssinian) policy.

This would explain the large numbers of Christian communities on the western coastal plain of Yemen, in the Himyarite capital Ẓafār, in Ḥaḍramawt, and in Najrān in the north, against which (and against their Abyssinian protectors) the Himyarite king Yūsuf Ashʿar (known in later Arab sources as *Dhū Nuwas*) took action at the beginning of the 520s.

These military actions culminated in the siege and surrender of Najrān and the massacre of all the Christian inhabitants. Aided by the Byzantines, the Abyssinian counterattack, led by the Abyssinian Negus (king) Ella-Aṣbeḥa in person, conquered South Arabia, putting an end to Himyarite rule. An Abyssinian, Abreha, established himself in the following years as the Christian ruler of South Arabia, but distanced himself to a considerable extent from the kings in Aksum. His reign, was marked by large building projects such as the last overhaul of the Mārib dam and the erection of a cathedral in the new capital, Ṣanʿāʾ. Abyssinian rule in South Arabia eventually ended in the 570s when the country was conquered by the Sasanians. It remained an Iranian province until AD 628 when its governor converted to Islam and declared his allegiance to the nascent Islamic state in al-Madīna.



4. Literacy in ancient Arabia

The art of writing was practised widely within the western-two thirds of the Peninsula. Arabia had its own family of alphabets (the South Semitic script family) descended from the Proto-alphabet of the second millennium, and which developed in parallel to the Phoenico-Aramaic alphabets of the Levant. Writing was used extensively not only by oasis-dwellers and in the states of South Arabia, but also, from the mid-1st millennium BC, by the nomads, who have left scores of thousands of graffiti on the desert rocks from southern Syria to the borders of Yemen. The South Semitic script family seems to be mentioned — as *ta-i-ma-ni-ti* (i.e. the script of Taymāʾ) — already in an inscription of the 8th century BC at Carchemish in what is now southern Turkey. In north-west and central Arabia, the languages of the inscriptions were Ancient North Arabian, a group of dialects related to Arabic, although Arabic itself appears to have remained a largely unwritten language until the 5th century AD. Curiously, in eastern Arabia we have very few inscriptions, and these are in Akkadian, Aramaic, Greek, and South

Arabian, with a handful (Hasaitic) in what may be an Ancient North Arabian dialect expressed in the Sabaic script.

The Ancient South Arabian languages attested in inscriptions from the geographical area which is now Yemen, were Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, and Hadramitic. These stand apart linguistically from the languages known from the rest of the Peninsula. With more than 5,000 inscriptions spread over 1,600 years (from the late 10th century BC to the 6th century AD), Sabaic is the best attested and the longest documented language, not only of South Arabia but of the entire Arabian Peninsula.

The documents, which are usually engraved on prepared stone surfaces, cover a wide range of topics and are written in an alphabet of 29 letters, the elegant geometrical forms of which were already fully developed by the 8th and 7th centuries BC. A “minuscule” version of the script, which has been known to scholarship since the 1970s, was incised on palm-leaf stalks and wooden sticks and used for day-to-day documents. The earliest of these known so far has been dated by 14C to between 1055 and 901 BC.