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Sabeans

JÉRÉMIE SCHIETTECATTE

Sabeans (Gr. *Σαβαῖοι*, Lat. *Sabaei*): were a people who settled in the central lowlands of Yemen, originating from Saba' (Sabaic: S'b'), a tribal confederation which evolved into the Sabean kingdom in the early first millennium BCE. This kingdom had a prominent position in the political landscape of pre-Islamic southern Arabia from the eighth century BCE to the third century CE.

The constituents of Sabean identity were the use of Sabaic, a Semitic language written in the South Semitic alphabet, and worship of the god Almaqah, tutelary deity of their pantheon.

The main Sabean settlements were: (1) Marib, at the mouth of the wādi Dhana, a 100-ha-wide town surrounded by the largest Arabian oasis (10,000 ha) and watered by a 600-m-long dam – a pilgrimage to Almaqah was conducted annually at the Awwam temple, on the outskirts of the city; (2) Sirwāh with its temple of Almaqah where the deeds of two of its leading kings have been carved in stone (inscriptions *Répertoire d'Épigraphie Sémitique (RES)* 3945 and DAI-Sirwāh 2005-50); (3) Nashq in the Jawf valley; and (4) Sana'a, in the Yemeni highlands.

The Sabeans gained ascendancy over the competing south-Arabian kingdoms by extensive conquests during the reigns of Yatha'amar Watar (late eighth century BCE) and Karib'il Watar (early seventh century BCE). At that time, Sabeans played a prominent part in the caravan trade, supplying Mesopotamia and southern Levant with frankincense and myrrh (respectively *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia (ARAB)* I 778.799; II 18.55, and Jer 6:20; Isa 60:6).

Facing the neighboring kingdoms of Qataban, Ma'in, and Hadramawt, Saba' shrank during the second half of the first millennium BCE.

The growing influence of the highland peoples in the Sabean tribal federation, mainly the tribes of Hāshid and Bakīl, marked the beginning of a Sabean renaissance in the second to third centuries CE.

The city of Sana'a, the counterpart of Marib, was raised to the rank of second capital in the highlands.

After the annexation of the kingdom of Saba' by Himyar in the late third century CE, the name of Saba' lived on until the mid-sixth century CE in the title borne by the Ḥimyarite sovereign "king of Saba', dhu-Raydān, Hadramawt and Yamanat." But the Sabeans were then only the men of the tribe of Saba' Kahlān, the inhabitants of Marib.

Testimony of Saba' appears twice in the Qur'ān: implicitly in sura 27 (*The Ant*), where the visit of a queen to king Solomon is reckoned to be that of the queen of Saba' by drawing a parallel with the Old Testament, and explicitly in sura 34 (*Saba'*), alluding to the prosperity of the oasis of Marib and referring to the breach of its great dam.

Sabeans should not be confused with the Sabians of southern Iraq or with the Sabians of Harran, a transcription of the Arabic: *ṣabi'ūn* which derives from *ṣaba* ("to turn toward") and has nothing to do with *Saba'*.

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