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Ḥimyar

JÉRÉMIE SCHIETTECATTE

Ḥimyar was the geographic area stretching over the southern highlands of Yemen and also the name of the tribal confederacy settled here.

After having seceded from the kingdom of Qatabān, this tribal confederacy assumed its independence: Ḥimyar adopted its own era (Raydānite era), starting in 110 BCE; it was then headed by the kings of dhū-Raydān, after the name of their lineage. The first known one, Shammar dhū-Raydān, is mentioned in south-Arabic inscriptions in the mid-first century BCE.

According to classical sources, Ẓafār was the capital of the Ḥimyarites (Lat.: *Homeritae*) (Plin. *HN* 6.26.104; *Peripl . Mar . Erythr* . 22), a town spread over 110 ha where the royal palace Raydān was built (Figure 1). The other major cities of the Ḥimyarite confederation were significant tribal centres: Samiʿan (today Maṣnaʿat Mariya) (tribe of Muhaqra); Hakir (tribe of Maytam); Baynūn (tribe of Shaddad); Yaklaʾ (now Nakhlat al-Ḥamrāʾ) (tribe of Dhamārī); Jabal al-ʿAwd (tribe of Dhubhan); Sawā (tribe of Maʿafir); Waʿlan (now al-Miʿsāl) (tribe of Radmān); Hidū (today al-Hadīm) (tribe of Khawlān); Ḥaṣī (the Madhà).

The Ḥimyarite economy depended on the aromatics trade through the ports of Makhawān (today al-Makhāʾ) and Aden, and on efficient agriculture resulting from the building of ambitious hydraulic structures including monumental dams.

Ḥimyar, unlike the other south-Arabian kingdoms, was not characterized by a tribal pantheon dominated by a tutelary deity. Its people worshiped most of the south-Arabian deities (Wadd, ʿAthtar, ʿAmm, Almaqah, etc.). During his reign, Abikarib Asʿad (before 384 to after 433 CE) embraced a monotheistic creed influenced by Judaism. This was also adopted by the tribal aristocracy behind him and by other people, shown by the rapid abandonment of the pagan temples.

From the first century BCE, Ḥimyar appeared as a competing power to the weakened kingdom of Sabaʾ. In the early Christian era, the rulers claimed their legitimacy over the throne of Sabaʾ by adopting the title of "king of Sabaʾ and dhu-Raydān," and Sabaic as the official language, and by making offerings to the Sabean tutelary deity Almaqah, in the Awwam temple in Marib. When the Sabean aristocracy broke free from the Ḥimyarites and restored the Sabean kingdom in the early second century CE, both powers entered a 200-year-long period of rivalry and conflict which ended with the final annexation of Sabaʾ. After having unified the whole of South Arabia, Ḥimyar started to stretch its dominion over the Hijaz and the Najd under the rule of Abikarib Asʿad, subjugating the main tribe in Central Arabia, Maʿadd (Procop. *HW* 1.19.14), and granting its government to its vassals, the princes of the tribe of Kinda.

In the early sixth century, the two Ḥimyarite kings Marthadʾilan Yanuf (ca. 500– 515) and Maʿdikarib Yaʿfur (ca. 515– 522) became subjects of the Aksumite Negus and adopted Christianity. This belief spread in particular to the outskirts of the kingdom (Najrān, Tihāma, Socotra). The accession of Yusuf Asʾar to the throne in 522 CE put an end to this subjugation. Communities of Christian converts supported by Aksum came into conflict with the Ḥimyarite ruler, resulting in the slaughter of Christians and an Ethiopian military intervention (Cosmas *Christian Topogr* . 2.140– 1), with Aksum seizing control of Ḥimyar for the next fifty years. The Ḥimyarite crown was assumed by the Negus officer, Abraha (ca. 530– 560), whose great deeds have left their imprint on both pre-Islamic and Islamic sources: the restoration of the great dam of Marib; the building of the church of Sanaʾa; the submission of all the tribes of Central and North Arabia, Maʿadd, Hagar-and-Khatt, Tayyiʾ, Yathrib, and Guzam. But above all, it was the Expedition of the Elephant carried out by Abraha against Mecca that made the deepest impression on his contemporaries and which is possibly echoed in the Qurʾān (sura of the Elephant).

In around 575 CE, Ḥimyar was conquered by the Persians under the rule of king Khusraw, and its importance diminished.

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CAPTION

Figure 1 Bas-relief of a crowned figure (z607) from the Himyarite capital Ẓafār, ca. fifth century CE. High-resolution 3D scan (Credit: J. Lindenbeck, Heidelberg University Expedition, 2010).

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