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## **Sabaeans on the Somali Coast**

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### **Abstract**

*In 2019, the illegal excavation of an ancient sanctuary on the Somali coast yielded monumental Sabaic inscriptions from approximately the 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. The inscriptions, similar in content and script, have shed light on their authors' origin (Sabaeans presumably from Ma'rib in Yemen), on the location's cultic nature, and more broadly on Sabaean endeavours to establish an ambitious trade network in the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE for the supply of aromatic resins from across the Horn of Africa, in order to convey them to the Near East and Mesopotamia. These inscriptions also highlight mastery of navigation techniques in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden as early as the period of the Sabaean mukarribs.*

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## Keywords

Puntland (Somalia); Ancient South Arabian epigraphy; Sabaic inscriptions; 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE; religious practices; seafaring.

## Introduction

As from the spring of 2019, photographs of illegally excavated remains and inscriptions on the Somali coast began circulating on the Web. Some were directly emailed to Khaldūn H. Nu‘mān and Christian J. Robin, with the request to intercede with local authorities. Until now, seven Sabaic inscriptions and an incense-burning altar have been brought to our attention.

The location of this looted items was undisclosed. We were only told that the discovery was made in the autonomous state of Puntland, part of the Federal Republic of Somalia. One of our sources indicated Cape Guardafui, the second the town of Qandala on the northern coast of Puntland. By comparing the landscape in the background of the photographs with the digital elevation model provided by Google Earth, we were able, however, to pinpoint an approximate location on the eastern coast of Somalia, *ca.* 50 km SSW of Cape Guardafui, 20 km north of Bargal and 110 km north of Xaafuun<sup>6</sup> (also named Ras Hafun). In the site's background, the overhanging Ras Shannaqiif and the tabular relief of Mount Xambi are easily recognizable (Fig. 1).

If these inferences are correct, the looted site would be located near the Abdexan well (Fig. 2). None of the archaeological surveys carried out along the eastern coast of Somalia<sup>7</sup> have ever ventured in this area. Yet it is precisely in the Abdexan area that the French explorer Georges Révoil reported in 1880 the presence of an ancient temple, whose outlines he sketched (Fig. 3).<sup>8</sup> Two facts suggest that this temple and the recently looted site are one and the same. Firstly, the photographs show the first course of a wall built in marginally drafted, pecked masonry, typical of South Arabian monumental constructions.<sup>9</sup> The nature and function of the monument is not recognizable from the photographic documentation at our disposal, but the content of the inscriptions indicates that it was most likely either a simple sacred enclosure, or a temple. Secondly, ancient built remains are exceptional on the Somali coast and inland. So far, evidence of pre-Islamic occupation is limited to rock art, megaliths, platforms and dry-stone cairns.<sup>10</sup> Neither the coastal sites of Heis (the alleged ancient port of *Mundu*),<sup>11</sup> nor Olog and Damo (the ancient *Aromata Emporion*),<sup>12</sup> nor even the site of Hafun-Main (the ancient port of *Opone*), have yielded any significant structures apart from the burials. A built temple is therefore an exceptional structure, and the probability of finding two distinct well-built temples at a very short distance from each other is very low.

## The inscriptions

Six inscriptions on large stone blocks and one small fragment were identified (Bari 2021-1 to 7: Figs. 4-10). Because of the impossibility of establishing the exact location of the texts, the acronym is the name of the province of Bari (Puntland), where they are located.

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<sup>6</sup> Transliterations of place names provided by the [www.geonames.org](http://www.geonames.org) gazetteer are the ones we favoured.

<sup>7</sup> Brandt, 1988; Chittick, 1969; 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Révoil, 1882: 51–53, 302–3. Révoil spells the site's name as Abdaham.

<sup>9</sup> Van Beek, 1958.

<sup>10</sup> Bouakaze-Khan, 2002; Brandt, 1988; Brandt & Brook, 1984; Brandt & Carder, 1987; Chittick, 1976; Cros et al. 2006; 2017; De Torres Rodriguez et al., 2019; Desanges et al., 1993; Gutherz et al., 2003; Lewis, 1958; 1961; Mire, 2008; 2015.

<sup>11</sup> De Torres Rodriguez et al., 2019; Desanges, 1992; Desanges et al., 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Révoil, 1882: 40–41, 294; Chittick, 1976: 124; 1979: 275. Only the presence of structures excavated in the rock is mentioned.

## Date

Six inscriptions (Bari 2021-1 to 2021-5, and 2021-7) are carefully engraved, in *boustrophedon* fashion. They are quite homogeneous graphically, and could thus all be coeval. Their style is still close to the standard established between the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> and the early 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>13</sup> The palaeographic style of the seventh inscription (Bari 2021-6), which is not boustrophedonic, is sloppier and therefore more difficult to date.

Two inscriptions mention a Sabaeen ruler, called Yatha‘amar (Bari 2021-4/3) and Yatha‘amar Watār (Bari 2021-6/2). If it is indeed the same ruler in both texts, then inscription Bari 2021-6, despite its divergent spelling, could be contemporary with the other five. In this case, all the inscriptions of the sanctuary would have been carved at the same time.

At least three Sabaeen rulers bear the name of Yatha‘amar Watār: two mukarribs, whose fathers were respectively Yakrubmalik and Sumhū‘alī,<sup>14</sup> and a king whose father was Yada‘īl.<sup>15</sup> The last of these three kings, whose reign is dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> or the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE,<sup>16</sup> seems to be out of the question for palaeographic and historical reasons. As for Yatha‘amar Watār son of Sumhū‘alī, whose reign is not precisely dated,<sup>17</sup> the inscriptions containing his name appear palaeographically more advanced than the Somali inscriptions.<sup>18</sup> One is therefore left with the earliest of the three, Yatha‘amar Watār son of Yakrubmalik, who reigned in the last quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE and laid the foundation for the political and cultural domination of Saba’ in Southern Arabia. Although we would be inclined to prefer the earliest date, it remains admittedly highly uncertain.

## Bari 2021-1 (Fig. 4)

- 1 *Gḥt bn Z’dm (b)d bn Hnfrm hqny*
- 2 *’ḥḥtn mws<sup>3</sup>ltn w-bn-hw Frznm ywm*
- 3 *rs<sup>2</sup>w ’ḥḥtn b-Rḥbm d-mbny S’lmtm /*

- 1 *Gḥt* son of *Z’dm* servant of the family *Hnfrm* dedicated to
- 2 Akhakhatān<sup>19</sup> the *mws<sup>3</sup>ltn* and his son *Frznm*, when
- 3 he was priest of Akhakhatān in *Rḥbm*, that of the construction of *S’lmtm*

## Commentary

This three-line inscription is engraved on one face of a huge stone block, and has a boustrophedonic ductus. Although the left and right edges of the block are chipped, the text is complete, and the reading is altogether certain.

L. 1. *Gḥt*, a name of which this is the first attestation. It evokes the famous Juḥà, a facetious character in popular Arabic literature, but that is obviously a fortuitous similarity (Pellat 1965). It might derive from the roots WGH, GḤḤ, GWH or even GḤW/Y.<sup>20</sup> On the patronymic *Z’dm*

<sup>13</sup> This would be Pirenne’s (1956) B1 style and Stein’s (2013) B style. The inscriptions of Karib‘īl Watar son of Dhamar‘alī, *mukarrib* (sovereign) of Saba’ constitute the *terminus post quem* for the beginning of Stein’s B phase. According to his palaeographic arrangement, the next phase for which an absolute date is available (the C1 period), is placed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, thus about three hundred years after the reign of the Sabaeen mukarrib.

<sup>14</sup> On Yatha‘amar Watār son of Yakrubmalik, see Nebes, 2016; on Yatha‘amar Watār son of Sumhū‘alī, see Robin & Ryckmans, 1980: 169.

<sup>15</sup> Von Wissmann, 1982: 216–319, 351–365.

<sup>16</sup> Stein, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Robin & Ryckmans, 1980: 169.

<sup>18</sup> *CIH* 563+*CIH* 956, MAFRAY-Ḥirbat Sa‘ūd 6 and 14.

<sup>19</sup> The vocalization of the deity’s name, like that of the few proper names vocalized in this study, is hypothetical. It could be also Akhīkhatan (with a second radical whose root is found in the common noun *mḥtn*, related to trade).

<sup>20</sup> *DRS*, 1994: 112.

(from the root Z'D “to yield”), see Hayajneh 1998: 156. His family name, *Hnfrm*, is also unknown in Ancient South Arabian (ASA).

L. 2. The exact nature of the object of this dedication, *mws<sup>3</sup>lt*, has not been established. While the sole occurrence of the word in Sabaic, found in a dedicatory rock inscription (Gl 1743-445), has generally been understood as a “propitiatory offering”, the various Minaic occurrences of *mws<sup>3</sup>l(t)* have rather been analysed in connection with their religious archaeological context, and interpreted as being a base or another unspecified architectural element linked to the offering ritual in the god’s temple.<sup>21</sup> The ritual connection is clear and is also confirmed by the verbal derivative *hs<sup>3</sup>l*, used in a Sabaic votive text relating the offering of bulls to the god Almaqah (Ja 669, 13, 24).<sup>22</sup> This further Sabaic instance of the word, inscribed on a stone block, seems to be similar to the Minaic examples, even though it does not provide additional information on the exact meaning of *mws<sup>3</sup>lt*, which therefore is left untranslated here.

The author also entrusts to the god the life of his son, *Frznm* (meaning “iron”),<sup>23</sup> according to a practice which is typical of the early ASA votive inscriptions.

L. 3. Preceded by the locative particle *b-*, *Rḥbm* likely indicates the name of the temple where these inscriptions were found and in which the author declares to have held the office of priest. The nominal syntagm following *Rḥbm*, “that of the monument of *S<sup>1</sup>lmtm*” is somewhat difficult. If one assumes that *Rḥbm* indicates the temple, as the formula *rs<sup>2</sup>w + DN + b* seems to suggest, then *S<sup>1</sup>lmtm* might denote a larger religious area, such as for instance the enlarged sanctuary,<sup>24</sup> or even the name of the entire site. It has to be noticed that in text no. 5, it is *Rḥbm* that is preceded by the syntagm *b-mbny*.

#### Bari 2021-2 (Fig. 5)

1 (D)*mr(n) w-Fl<sup>1</sup>m bny Yh* —

2 *yṯ<sup>1</sup> ‘bd d-Rb(n) hqn* —

3 *y ‘ḥḥtn ms<sup>3</sup>ndn-b-{}<sup>1</sup> ṯt* —

4 *r w-b ‘lmqh w-b ‘ḥḥt* —

5 *n w-b ‘b-hmy Yhyṯ<sup>1</sup>*

1 *Dmrn* and *Fl<sup>1</sup>m* sons of Yuhay-

2 *tha<sup>1</sup>* servant of *dhū-Rbn* dedi-

3 cated to Akhakhātān the inscription, by *‘Athtar*,

4 by Almaqah, by Akhakhātān

5 and by their father Yuhaytha<sup>1</sup>

#### Commentary

<sup>21</sup> See the lemma’s entry in the Sabäisches Wörterbuch (<http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/Sabaweb>, accessed 25/05/2021). The root is also used in the onomasticon (*Ws<sup>3</sup>l*, *Ws<sup>3</sup>lm*, *Ws<sup>3</sup>lt*). One Minaic occurrence, al-Jawf 04.41, is particularly clear in this sense: *ywm<sup>4</sup> s<sup>1</sup>qdm-s<sup>1</sup> ‘lnb<sup>5</sup>ṯ Yd<sup>1</sup> w-Ns<sup>2</sup>n<sup>6</sup> mnql<sup>7</sup> ṣhrn<sup>7</sup> w-mws<sup>3</sup>ln b-byt<sup>8</sup> ṯtr d-Grb* “when *‘lnbt Yd<sup>1</sup>* and Nashshān entrusted him the cutting of the stone coating and of the *mws<sup>3</sup>ln*”. Here the matter referred to is the direction of construction works in the *‘Athtar* temple at Nashshān, and *mws<sup>3</sup>ln* is in the plural form and in the genitive case.

<sup>22</sup> It must be noted, however, that the form *yhs<sup>3</sup>l<sup>1</sup>nn* could in fact derive from another root, such as *s<sup>3</sup>ll*, since in the prefix conjugation of the C-stem one would rather expect the spelling *yhw<sup>3</sup>s<sup>3</sup>l<sup>1</sup>nn* (*/yuhawsilu/*) (Stein, 2003: 189). Etymologically, the root *ws<sup>3</sup>l* is extremely rare in Semitic, and the only parallel is with Arabic *tawassala* “he sought to get at, obtain” and *wasīla* “a means of access to a thing, of becoming near to a thing” (Lane: 3053). It should also be remarked that religious contexts are frequent in Arabic too, where the root means to seek God’s favour.

<sup>23</sup> Sima, 2000: 325–328.

<sup>24</sup> One of the authors argued, however, that this enlarged sacral area was what is called *mḥrm* “sanctuary” in the ASA inscriptions (Robin, 2012: 23ff).

L. 1. This second votive inscription has two subjects, which are the sons of Yuhaythaʿ, a person who is also mentioned in text no. 3. While the personal name of the first individual is relatively rare in the ASA onomasticon (Hayajneh 1998: 142), the second name is unknown. As for the patronymic, Yuhaythaʿ is especially found in Sabaic inscriptions, some of them belonging to the early phase. The root YTʿ is extremely frequent in the pre-Islamic Arabian onomasticon (Müller 1979).

One interesting morphological feature is the word *bny*, which is grammatically a nominative dual in the construct state. Stein has argued that early Sabaic probably preserved the case distinction in the dual between the nominative, marked with -ø (/ -ā/) and the oblique case, marked with -y (/ -ay/), since in the inscriptions having a dual subject, the word for “son” appears most of the times as *bn* (/binā/).<sup>25</sup> Now, this inscription provides a further occurrence of the dual subject *bny* instead of *bn*.<sup>26</sup> Since the group of inscriptions likely dates back to the early phase of early Sabaic, this occurrence of *bny* would provide a *terminus post quem* for the process of the loss of case distinction in Sabaic, which would have begun much earlier than has generally been suggested (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE).<sup>27</sup>

L. 2. Usually, and as for the text no. 1, the title of *ʿbd* “servant” refers to the author of the text. This would imply that, contrary to *bny*, the word *ʿbd* preserved the ending of the nominative dual (/ʿabdā/). However, in view of the high status of the subjects’ father, Yuhaythaʿ, it could well be that *ʿbd* in fact refers to him and is thus in the nominative singular. The lineage whom Yuhaythaʿ or the authors declare to serve, *Rbn*, is unknown in ASA.<sup>28</sup>

L. 3. The stone mason made an error in the parsing of the text, carving the proclitic particle *b-* after the word *ms<sup>3</sup>ndn* instead of after the word divider.

#### Bari 2021-3 (Fig. 6)

- 1 *Mlkn bn Nʿm ʿrb ʿḥḥ* —  
 2 *tn ḥqny ʿḥḥtn nfs<sup>1</sup>-hw*  
 3 *(yw)m myr b-ʿm ʿb-hw b-m* —  
 4 *rkb Yhytʿ bn Zwr(ʿ)[..]*

- 1 *Mlkn* son of *Nʿm* in charge of the offerings to Akhakha-  
 2 *tān* dedicated to Akhakhatān his life  
 3 when he provided the food supplies with his father on the boat  
 4 of Yuhaythaʿ son of *Zwr* [..]

#### Commentary

L. 1. The author’s onomastic formula in this inscription only contains the personal name and the patronymic. Both are quite rare, and there is little information on the patronymic provenance.<sup>29</sup> The author bears the religious title of *ʿrb* of the god. The root *ʿrb* has several meanings in Semitic, but in religious contexts it is linked etymologically to the idea of “making

<sup>25</sup> See lastly Stein, 2013: 55.

<sup>26</sup> Unless one supposes, following Al-Jallad (2015: 61), that similarly to Safaitic, Sabaic *bny* reflects (at least in some cases) the diminutive pattern *fʿyl* (cf. Classical Arabic *bunayya* “my little son”, Fischer, 2002: 51, §81). This, however, can be hardly accepted in the case of Sabaic inscriptions, in view of the generalized use of *bny* from middle Sabaic onwards.

<sup>27</sup> Stein, 2002: 207-208. Interestingly, another occurrence of *bny* referring to a dual subject is found in a Sabaic inscription from Ethiopia (*RIÉth* 23).

<sup>28</sup> Though *Rbn* is rare, *Rbm* (both from the root RBB, see Hayajneh, 1998: 290) is used more frequently in the ASA onomasticon, albeit as an individual name.

<sup>29</sup> See Jabal Riyām 2006-5 for an occurrence of *Mlkn* in early Sabaic, and DhM 156 for *Nʿm*.

an offering, sacrificing to the god”.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, while the verbal derivatives are used across all the ASA languages (except in Hadramitic), the religious office of *rb* was attested so far only in a single Qatabanic text (Doe 2).

L. 3. The inscription provides the first secure example in ASA of the verb *myr* in the G-stem. The root was otherwise mostly used with the nominal derivative *myr*, attested either in the formal inscriptions or in the minuscule (cursive) texts. Besides, a few occurrences of the verb *myr* (one of which in the C-stem, the other doubtfully in the G-stem or D-stem) were also known. As for the meaning of *myr*, it must be noted that while the root has been generally associated in literature with the selling or harvest of cereals, or with cereals alone (in the case of the substantive),<sup>31</sup> a more general meaning of “supply, deliver with food” has also been suggested,<sup>32</sup> and this on the base of the Arabic *mīra* “he brought, or conveyed or purveyed”.<sup>33</sup> L. 3. Three of these inscriptions contain the word *mrkb*, which in this text is defined as “the *markab* of Yuhaytha’” (Bari 2021-3) and in the other two as “the *markab* of his lord Yatha’amar Watar” (Bari 2021-4) and “the *markab* of Saba’” (Bari 2021-4 and 6). The word derives from the root *rakaba*, which in Semitic means “to ride on horseback or on camel, to travel”.<sup>34</sup> The root is known in the ASA inscriptions and is used for instance in verb *rkb* “to ride” and homograph noun *rkb* “camel rider”.<sup>35</sup> The nominal derivative *mrkb*, however, has never been found in the monumental inscriptions from Yemen, but only in one Sabaic graffito from the area of Ḥimā, in southern Saudi Arabia.<sup>36</sup> The substantive based on the *mafʿal* pattern may denote, as in Arabic, any type of vehicle that is used to transport someone or something.<sup>37</sup> In these inscriptions, *markab* could therefore indicate both a convoy traveling by land, such as a caravan, or a ship or vessel (when the journey was made by sea). In the Somali context, there is little doubt that the Sabaeans travelled by sea, which confers to *mrkb* the meaning “boat” or even “fleet”, assuming that the form is a plural or a collective instead of a singular. Were our translation of *mrkb* with “boat” instead of “caravan” correct, this would be the first occurrence of a maritime term in the ASA inscriptions well before the beginning of the Christian era.<sup>38</sup> L. 4. For the last name, which with two letters missing, see *Zwrʿly* (Y85.GF/3) or *Zwrʿdn* (Haram 6/4 et Haram 12/7).

#### Bari 2021-4 (Fig. 7)

- 1 *Lhy ʿtt bn ʿb ʿmr d-Ḥdqn d-Mry(b)[... ...]*
- 2 *[hqny ʿhh]tn kl wld-hw w-msʿlmn ywm h(wtb-hw)*
- 3 *(mr) ʿ-hw Yt ʿmr w-y(mrn sʿw)hm b- ʿly mrkb mr ʿ-[hw]*
- 4 *(w)-qdm mrkb Sʿb ʿ w-yhmrn (mṭbtm) w-yqtdm m[... ...]*
- 5 *[... ...]n w-b[... ...] b ʿl [..]rn w-byt[.]*
- 6 *[... ...]*

<sup>30</sup> *BSD*: 18-19; *LCDG*: 68-69.

<sup>31</sup> *BSD*: 89.

<sup>32</sup> Stein, 2010: 729; Sabäisches Wörterbuch (<http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/Sabaweb>, accessed 07/06/2021). Refer to the latter for the complete bibliographical references.

<sup>33</sup> *LAEL*: 2747.

<sup>34</sup> *LCDG*, 1987: 469. The root has a second main meaning, “to find, acquire, obtain”.

<sup>35</sup> Sabäisches Wörterbuch under the root *rkb* (<http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/Sabaweb>, accessed 18/06/2021).

<sup>36</sup> The graffito, still unpublished, was discovered by the Saudi-French Archaeological and Epigraphic Mission to Najran in 2017. There is no doubt that in the context of Ḥimā, *markab* indicates a caravan, for already as early as the 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> early century BC, Ḥimā was a stopover for caravans heading from Yemen northwards towards Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

<sup>37</sup> *LAEL*: 1142.

<sup>38</sup> In a much later period of the language, Sabaic lexicon has two words indicating a ship, *flk* (borrowed into the European languages, e.g. English *felucca*) and *sʿdq* (see *BSD*).

1 *Lhy 'tt* son of *'b 'mr*, he of Ḥadaqān of Ma'rib [... ...]  
 2 [dedicated to Akhakha]tān all his children and the altar, when his lord  
 3 Yatha'amar appointed him, and so he provided supplies (?) on the boat of his lord,  
 4 and directed the boat of Saba' and provided supplies according to the regulations (?) and was  
 in charge of ? [... ..]  
 5 [... ...]n and b[... ...] master of (?) and the temple of [.]  
 6 [... ...]

### Commentary

This inscription is the longest of the group and is carved on a larger stone block, which nevertheless is broken on all sides and also has holes on the carved surface. The reading of the text is thus quite uncertain in many places, and much of the text has gone lost. The number of missing letters on the left side of the stone cannot be inferred surely on the basis of the formulary, especially in lines 1 and 2.

The author, originating from a well-known Sabaeen family (see below – Historical commentary), offered to the god both his offspring (i.e. he entrusted them to His protection) and an altar (*ms'lm*).

L. 2. Although part of the narrative section of the text is missing and the reading is uncertain, one can understand that the dedication was made when the author was ordained by the king to be in charge of the boat and provide supplies to it. The key-verb introduced by the temporal conjunction *ywm* is *hw'tb*, the subject of which is the king Yatha'amar (*mr'hw Yt'mr*), while the suffixed pronoun refers to the author *Lhy 'tt*. In this context, the C-stem of the verb *w'tb* means literally “to make someone sit, to place”, from which “to appoint” as a result of the semantic transfer from concrete to abstract.<sup>39</sup>

L. 3. In the following phrase introduced by the conjunction *w*, the change of the verbal form with the use of the long – or -N – form of the prefix conjugation (*ymrn*) seems a syntactic strategy to mark the new (unexpressed) subject, *Lhy 't*. The construct *w-ymrn* is an example of consecutive imperfect with the form *yf'ln* instead of *yf'l*, the latter being more frequent in these contexts and in early Sabaic.<sup>40</sup> The verb comes from the root *myr*, which has already been encountered in text no. 3 and that is repeated again in line 4, where it is in the C-stem. No proper etymology has been found for the word *s'whm* that follows the verb. Admittedly, the reading is not certain either, as the first two letters could be read differently than as suggested.

L. 4. The context is broken, but after what looks like a coordinate infinitive (*w-qdm*), the syntax varies again with two coordinated consecutive imperfects, the first formed with the long prefix conjugation and the second with the short one (*w-yhmrn*, *w-yqtdm*). In the middle, a word which is doubtfully read as *mtbtm*, possibly a substantive in the plural from the root *twb*.<sup>41</sup>

L. 5. The context is heavily broken. Only two entire words can tentatively be read: *b'l* (possibly “master”) and *byt* “temple”.

### Bari 2021-5 (Fig. 8)

[... ...]

1 *w-wd' hqnyt-hw w-*  
 2 *mhrt-hw w-nfs' m –*  
 3 *t-hw Q'm b-'dn '(h) –*  
 4 *htn b-qdmt Lhy 'tt*

<sup>39</sup> On the root *w'tb* in Semitic, see *DRS*: 656–657.

<sup>40</sup> Nebes, 1994.

<sup>41</sup> *BSD*: 151–152, Sabäisches Wörterbuch under the lemma *mtbt* (<http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/Sabaweb>, accessed 09/06/2021).



5 *ḏ-Hḏqn w-(b)[..]-hmw ḥht* —  
 6 *n ḥṭm bn ḏ-(ṭ)br b-(m)* —  
 7 *bnṯ Rḥb(m)*

[... ...]

1 and he placed his dedication,  
 2 his possessions and the life of his female servant  
 3 *Q'm* under the will of Akha-  
 4 khatān during the command of *Lhy ṭt*  
 5 he of Ḥadaqān and their [...] Akhakha-  
 6 tān in ḥṭm (?), against the one who may bring destruction (?) in  
 7 the construction of *Rḥbm*

### Commentary

This seven-line inscription is carved on a square block which is unbroken on its sides. The initial part of the text was carved on another block, which had to be placed on this one.

L. 1. This is one of the few Sabaic examples of the *wḏ' b-ḏn* formula, otherwise typical of Hadramitic votive inscriptions.<sup>42</sup> Since the verb is transitive, as it holds three direct objects (*hqnyṭ-hw, mhrt-hw, nḥs' ḥm t-hw Q'm*), it can be interpreted pragmatically as a D-stem of the verb *wḏ'*, “to go out”, from which “to let go (out), put, place”.<sup>43</sup> As for the noun *ḏn*, interpretations vary between the one suggested here, “will” and its related nuances,<sup>44</sup> or that of “ear”.<sup>45</sup>

L. 3. The name of the author's servant, *Q'm* is unknown in ASA but it is attested a few times in Safaitic inscriptions.<sup>46</sup>

L. 4. The office held by *Lhy ṭt* is repeated here with a nominal syntagm (*b-qdmt*), contrary to the text no. 4.

L. 5. It is not possible to read the word after the preposition *b-*. It is in the construct state with the suffixed pronoun *-hmw* and refers to the god Akhakhatān.

L. 6. The stone surface is very damaged and the reading suggested is highly uncertain. At the beginning of the line, the word ḥṭm is difficult to analyse. Syntactically, it can only be the epithet of the divine name, although one wonders why there is no mention of it in the other inscriptions of this group. It seems that after the invocation to the god, there might be a curse against anyone having evil intents (*ṭbr*) towards the sanctuary or, more specifically, the inscribed object.

### Bari 2021-6 (Fig. 9)

[... ...]

1 *[.]h[.]y[.] w[... ...]*  
 2 *(Yṭ) ḥmr Wtr [... ...]* —  
 3 *[.] mrkb S'(b')[... ...]*  
 4 *(w)-s'b' '(s')[... ...]*  
 5 *[.] wn[.] [.]y[... ...]*  
 6 *(b-ḥ)ḥtn w-[... ...]* —

<sup>42</sup> In these inscriptions, the verb is used in the T-stem (*ṭd'*).

<sup>43</sup> See DRS: 595–596; Sabäisches Wörterbuch under the root *wḏ'* (<http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/Sabaweb>, accessed 10/06/2021).

<sup>44</sup> Priolella, 2018, 134–135.

<sup>45</sup> Sabäisches Wörterbuch (<http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/Sabaweb>, accessed 10/06/2021).

<sup>46</sup> See OCIANA (<http://krc2.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/>, accessed 10/06/2021).

7 r [...]rt' [...]  
8 [... ...]

[... ...]  
1 [.]h[.]y[.] w  
2 Yatha'amar Watār [... ...]—  
3 [.] the boat of Saba' [... ...]  
4 and he carried out an expedition [... ...]  
5 [.] wn[.] [.]y[... ...]  
6 by Akhakatān and [... ...]—  
7 r [...]rt' [...]  
8 [... ...]

### Commentary

The stone on which this inscription was carved is heavily damaged and broken. Moreover, the available photograph does not allow one to infer the original size of the block and the lost text. L. 2. A Sabaeen king bearing the same name, Yatha'amar, without any epithet, is mentioned in text no. 4 (l. 3). Despite the difference in palaeography between the two texts, it is reasonable to argue that the king referred to here is the same one.

L. 3. See the text no. 4 (l. 4) for the mention of the boat of Saba' (*mrkb S'b'*).

L. 4. A possible restoration could be: (w)-s'b' '(s')/b't "and he carried out the expeditions". It must be noticed, however, that such statements are much rarer than those implying an internal accusative construction,<sup>47</sup> and that in the latter, the noun precedes the verb.<sup>48</sup>

Ll. 5-8. In the last lines, little text survives and apart from the invocation to the god, no other context can be read or restored.

### Bari 2021-7 (Fig. 10)

1 [... ...]Rbn hdy[... ...]  
2 [... ...]Yh]yt' bn Z(w)[r' .. ...]  
3 [... ...]

1 [... ...]Rbn hdy[... ...]  
2 [... ...]Yuha]ytha' son of Z(w)[r' .. ...]  
3 [... ...]

### Commentary

Little remains of this fragment. In L. 1, the lineage name *Rbn* (see text no. 2) is perhaps mentioned. The word *hdy* is difficult to interpret, and could derive from the root HDD, attested in ASA as the verb *hd* "sacralize".<sup>49</sup>

L. 2 contains the name Yuhaytha' (see text no. 2 and 3).

### Discussion

The significance of these inscriptions is considerable: they testify to the foundation of a site on the Somali coast well before any ancient coastal occupations known so far; they attest the presence of Sabaeans in this region of the Horn of Africa, clearly for commercial purposes

<sup>47</sup> Cf. the occurrence in FB-Mahram Bilqis 2: *w-hmr-hmw 'lmqh b<sup>14</sup>l 'wm s'b' s'b't šdqm* "And Almaqah master of Awwām granted them to carry out a satisfying expedition".

<sup>48</sup> E.g. Ja 740: *b-kl s'b'<sup>7</sup>t s'b'* "in all the expeditions that he made".

<sup>49</sup> BDS: 65.

and upon the orders of the Sabaean kings; they provide evidence of both the worship of a god otherwise nearly unknown in South Arabia, and the construction of a temple dedicated to him.

#### A sanctuary consecrated to the god Akhakhatān

In the absence of any scientific survey or excavation, one can only infer the archaeological context from the content and nature of the inscriptions. The votive character of all the texts thus proves that this site on the Somali shore must have been a sanctuary or a temple, which was consecrated to the cult of a god named Akhakhatān (*ʿḥḥtn*). The religious site itself must have been called either *Rḥbm* or *Sʿlmtm*. By using textual formulas that are typical of early Sabaic votive inscriptions, the commissioners offered this deity the object on which the text is inscribed and that was intended to be placed in the temple, namely a base or slab (text no. 1), the inscription itself (text no. 2) or a ritual altar (text no. 4). In the other texts, they simply entrusted to the deity their lives and the lives of their loved ones (children, offspring, servants), as well as their property. In the final invocations, the pan-South Arabian god ʿAthtar and the Sabaean god Almaqah are also mentioned.

It is somewhat unexpected to find in these texts the mention of the worship of a god like Akhakhatān, a clearly secondary deity in southern Arabia, only known so far from two short Sabaic dedications, one of unknown provenance (A-20-1029), the other from Haram in the Jawf valley (YM 28823). Interestingly, these texts also date back to the early phase of Sabaean history, as their graphic style is archaic, pre-dating the first quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. In inscription YM 28823, Akhakhatān is invoked after Almaqah (the tribal god of Sabaʿ), Yadaʿismuhū (the tribal god of Haram) and ʿAthtar dhu-Ragmat (venerated in the oasis of Najrān). It can therefore be safely assumed that, like ʿAthtar dhu-Ragmat, the god Akhakhatān was worshipped by an ally of Haram rather than by the people of Haram itself. This god may have been the protector of traders or of sailors.

#### The Sabaean origin of the inscriptions' authors

Several clues indicate a Sabaean origin for the people who commissioned these inscriptions, clearly high-ranking figures of Sabaean society, who held political or religious functions. These are the reference made to the Sabaean ruler Yathaʿamar Watar, the mention of the deity Almaqah and the use of the Sabaic language. The onomastics of the authors also points in this direction.

Three names or patronymics occur frequently in Sabaʿ (*Yhytʿ*, *Lhyʿtt*, and *ʿbʿmr*). Three others, on the other hand, are rarely attested (*Zʿdm*, *Mlkʿn*, *Nʿm*), while the remaining names appear here for the first time. As for lineage names, two are unknown (*Ḥnfrʿm*, *Rbʿn*). The third (*d-Ḥdqn*) is not known in Southern Arabia itself, but is attested in two Sabaic inscriptions from Maṭara, in present-day Eritrea (*RIÉth* 55, 56). One is obviously tempted to link this lineage with a town bearing the same name attested in the documents and located 30 km north of Ṣanʿāʿ, in the territory of the kingdom of Samʿī.<sup>50</sup> This, however, appears to be contradicted by the inscription Bari 2021-4, which seemingly locates this lineage in the Sabaean capital Maʿrib. Be that as it may, these inscriptions confirm that the lineage of Ḥadaqān played a major role in the explorations and expeditions of Sabaʿ beyond the Red Sea in the early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, which led to the foundation of the Sabaean settlements in northern Ethiopia and then on the coast of Somalia.

Moreover, Maʿrib is also the probable origin of the commissioners of several inscriptions from the Ethiopia-Eritrea region (*RIÉth* 26, 27, 30 and 39). The fact that these people originated from the capital of the kingdom of Sabaʿ is no coincidence, and suggests that the African expeditions were a centralised enterprise, organised and managed by Sabaean

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. Gr. 125 (Bauer & Lundin, 1998); Schiettecatte, 2011: 254–258.

rulers. Yet while the Sabaeen presence in northern Ethiopia and the Ethio-Sabaic inscriptions have only offered indirect clues,<sup>51</sup> the Somali inscriptions for the first time provide explicit evidence of such involvement of Sabaeen power in distant maritime expeditions.

From the linguistic point of view, it should be highlighted that there is a major difference between these inscriptions found on the Somali coast and the Ethio-Sabaic inscriptions from Ethiopia-Eritrea, as the former are drafted in perfect Sabaic, and show no trace of the foreign linguistic and cultural features that can be recognized in the Ethio-Sabaic corpus, which testify to a situation of prolonged contact and interaction between the settlers of Sabaeen origin and local populations, speakers of Ethio-Semitic languages.<sup>52</sup>

### A Sabaeen trading venture

As has been said, the suggested date for the drafting of the inscriptions and therefore the foundation of this site south of Cape Guardafui is uncertain. In any event, it happened after the Sabaeans began to settle in the Eritrean hinterland and on the Ethiopian Tigray plateau.<sup>53</sup> In the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Sabaeans, moving from inner Yemen, came into contact with the people of the Tihāma coastal plain<sup>54</sup> and seized political control of the Arabian coastline (Fig. 2).<sup>55</sup> Both political control and navigational experience on the Arabian and African coastal seas played the part of a catalyst for ambitious maritime exploration, which is illustrated by a fleet of Saba' sailing along the northern coast of Somalia on behalf of the Sabaeen ruler Yatha'amar Watar.

There is little doubt that the primary goal of the Sabaeen presence on the Somali coast was the supply of aromatic resins. The putative location of the Somalian site, near Abdexan, has been described as receiving very little rainfall but endowed with numerous springs and incense trees.<sup>56</sup> All ancient geographers praised the abundance and quality of its aromatics.<sup>57</sup>

Like the routes described a few centuries later by the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, navigation was likely along the coast, from the Bāb al-Mandab to the Gulf of Tadjura and then along the northern coast of present-day Somaliland to Cape Guardafui, before veering south to the Bargal area, where the shrine is located.

An isolated item may testify to this coastal navigation by Sabaeans. A short South Arabian inscription of four characters is preserved not far from the coastal town of Shuula (or Shal'aw),<sup>58</sup> 25 km southwest of Heīs, the ancient *Mundu* of the *Periplus* (Fig. 2). The

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<sup>51</sup> Gerlach, 2013 ; Nebes, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Bernard et al., 1991. A useful study summing up of the historiography of Sabaic inscriptions from Ethiopia is Lusini, 2000. The linguistic element could in turn inform us on the organization of the commercial expedition on the Somali coast and the origins of the authors of the texts from Somalia, who came directly from their homeland of Saba' and did not hail from Sabaeen communities in Ethiopia and Eritrea, as their lineages might make one assume. It could also provide an indirect clue on local communities in Somalia and the type of relations the Sabaeen traders may have had with them. After all, there are almost no settlements prior to the Islamic period, and classical sources only mention mobile local populations who occasionally came to the coast to carry out commercial exchange in a few modest existing outposts.

<sup>53</sup> Gerlach, 2013; Nebes, 2010; Robin & De Maigret, 1998; Wolf & Nowotnick, 2010.

<sup>54</sup> Beeston, 1995; Phillips, 1997; 2005; Robin, 1995.

<sup>55</sup> Inscription DAI Širwāḥ 2005-50, at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, reports Sabaeen military expeditions against the tribes and kingdoms between Saba' and the southern coast of Arabia: Yanhagū, Radmān, Ru'nān, Yaḥīr, Dahas, 'Ayn and Yuhantīl in the Aden hinterland. In the early 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Saba's authority was reaffirmed on the southern coast of present-day Yemen through the subjugation of the tribes of Ma'afir, Dhubbān, Shargab in the southwest, Yuhantīl in the Aden hinterland, Dahas and the Dathīna region in the southeast (*RÉS* 3945).

<sup>56</sup> S.n. 1938, *Africa Orientale Italiana*: 621.

<sup>57</sup> Artemidorus quoted by Strabo, *Geogr.* VI, 4, 19 (Seubert, 2020: 911); Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* XII, 66-70; *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 8-13.

<sup>58</sup> Mire, 2015: 126–27, fig. 4.

inscription is engraved on a stone block, which is part of a drystone tomb.<sup>59</sup> It reads *Ybhd*. Apart from the seven Bari inscriptions, this is the only South Arabian inscription from Somalia known to date.<sup>60</sup> Despite the proximity of ancient *Mundu*, which brought together populations of different origins in the early Christian era,<sup>61</sup> a much earlier date may be postulated on the basis of an archaic script reminiscent of Jacqueline Pirenne's style A. The argument, however, is not decisive given the inscription's rough appearance.

### Conclusion

One can retain that during a period that cannot be determined more precisely, sometime between the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 7<sup>th</sup> BCE, a fleet led by Sabaeans was sent by a ruler of Saba' to the Somali coast, skirted Cape Guardafui and landed halfway between Raas Shannaqiif and the present-day city of Bargal. This episode was sufficiently long-lasting or recurrent for a shrine dedicated to the South Arabian deity Akhkhātān to be built and votive inscriptions to be carefully engraved. It is clear that this commercial venture was the culmination of a process of political and economic expansion of the kingdom of Saba' in Southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa.

### Sigla

A-20-1029: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-401>  
al-Jawf 04.41: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-2515>  
BSD: Beeston *et al.* 1982.  
CIH 563 + CIH 956: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-144>  
DAI Şirwāh 2005-50: Nebes 2016.  
DhM 156: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-543>  
Doe 2: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-4458>  
DRS: Cohen *et al.* 1970-2010.  
FB-Mahram Bilqis 2: Bron 2012.  
Gl 1743-445: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-1156>  
Haram 6: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-1296>  
Haram 12: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-2839>  
Gr 125: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-9861>  
Ja 669: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-6065>  
Ja 740: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-6115>  
Jabal Riyām 2006-5: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-6866>  
*LAEL*: Lane 1963.  
*LCDG*: Leslau 1987.  
MAFRAY-Ḥirbat Sa'ūd 6: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-1357>  
MAFRAY-Ḥirbat Sa'ūd 14: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-6869>  
*RÉS* 3945: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-7349>  
*RIÉth* 23, 26, 27, 30, 39, 55, 56: Bernand *et al.* 1991.  
Y85.GF/3: <http://dasi.cnr.it/csai-epi-1279>  
YM 28823: Arbach & Audouin 2007, 44-45.

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<sup>59</sup> Jorge de Torres Rodriguez, pers. comm.

<sup>60</sup> S. Mire locates possible Sabeian or Ḥimyarite graffiti at the rock sites of Dhagah Nabi Gallay and Dhagah Kureh, in the hinterland (Mire, 2015: 126). Photographs of the Dhagah Kureh rock paintings have been made available on the British Museum's digital photo library (<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/x321517>). Their examination shows neither convincing signs nor any meaningful sequence of characters.

<sup>61</sup> De Torres Rodriguez *et al.*, 2019; Desanges *et al.*, 1993.

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## Figures and Captions



Figure 1: Surroundings of Abdexan, prov. of Bari, Somalia. Presumed location of the discovery of the Sabaeen inscriptions identified via Google Earth (bottom), according to the photographs provided (middle, top) (J. Schiettecatte, after GoogleEarth, and courtesy of Mahad Jebiy).

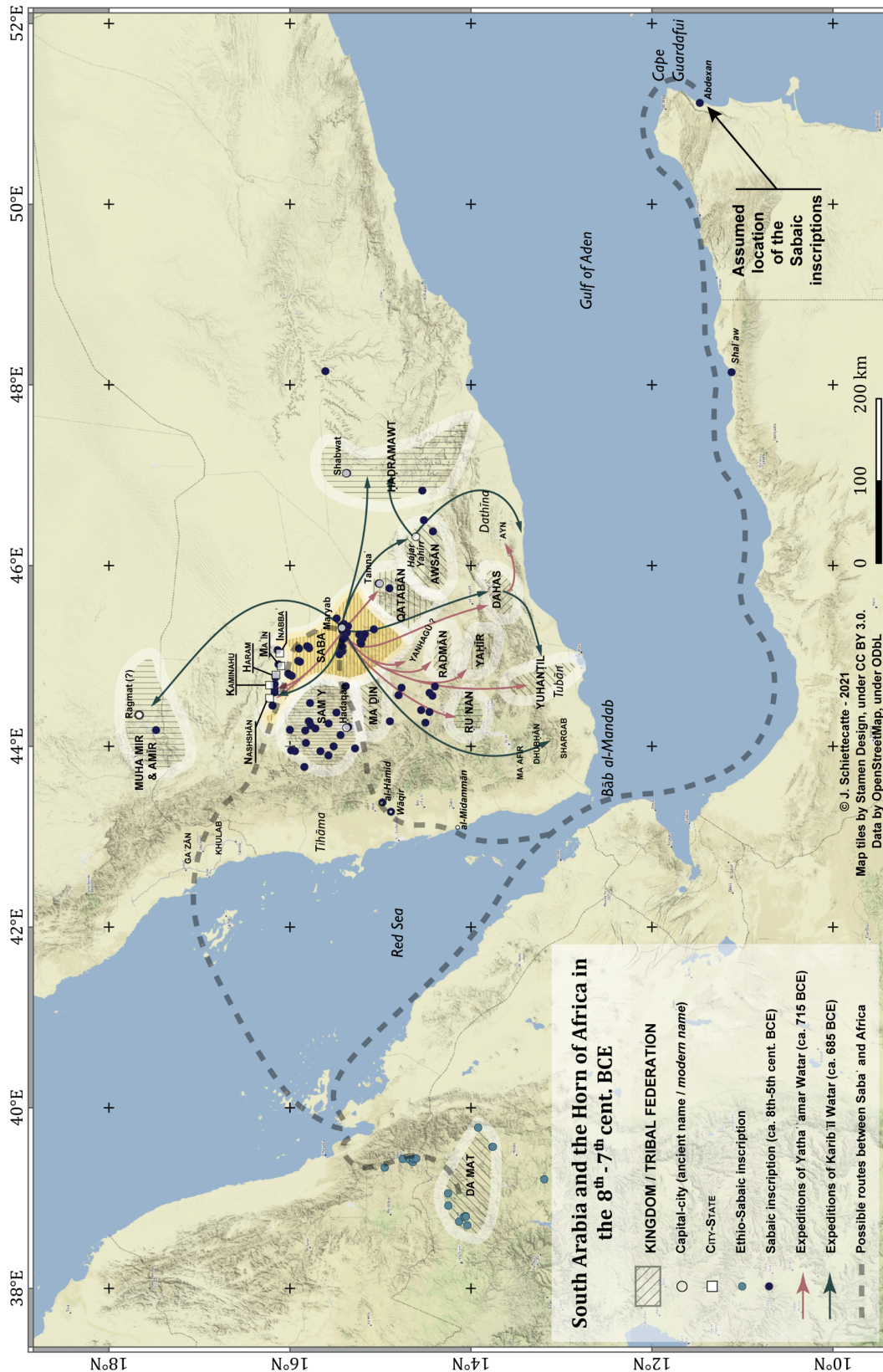
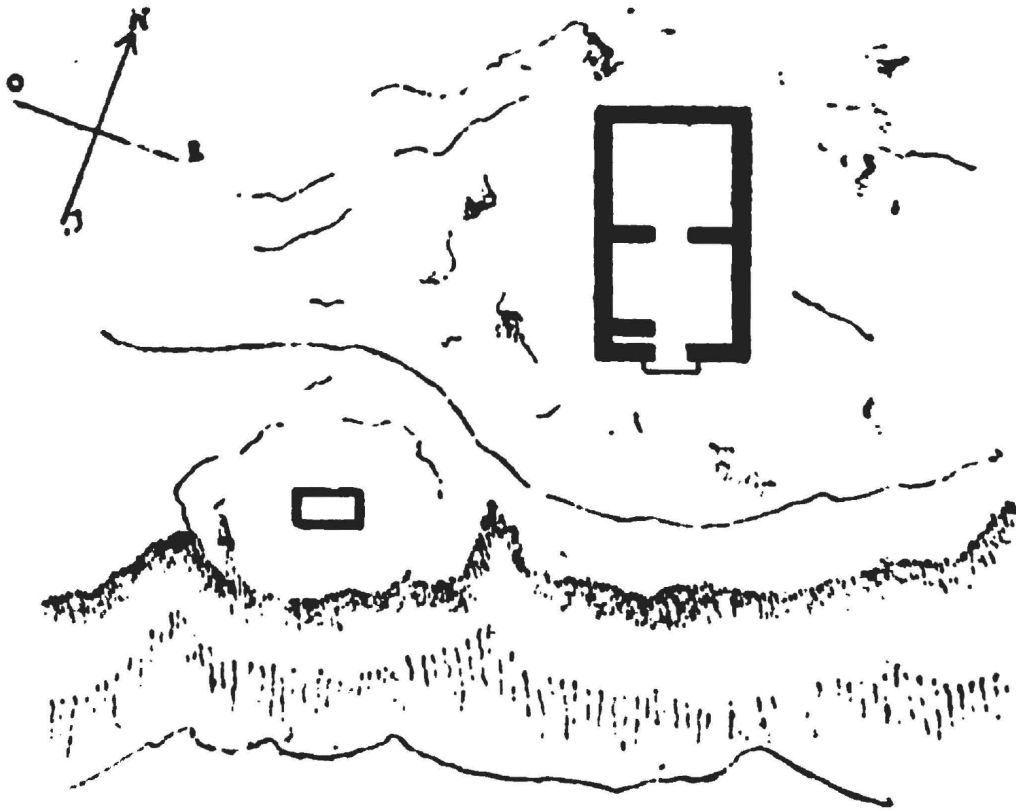


Figure 2: Map of South Arabia and the Horn of Africa in the 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE and distribution of the Sabaic and Ethio-Sabaic inscriptions from the ca. 8<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE (J. Schiettecatte / map tiles by Stamen Design, under CC BY 3.0).



**Ruines de Khor Abdaham.**

Figure 3: Sketch map of the ruins seen south of Abdexan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by G. Révoil (Révoil 1882, 52).

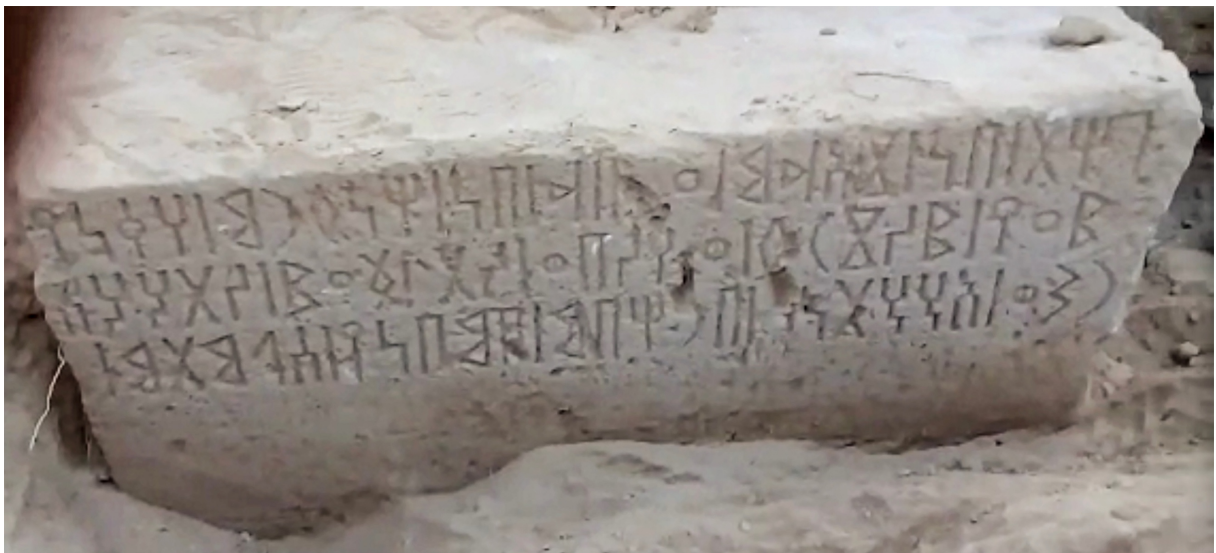


Figure 4: Inscription Bari 2021-1 (Courtesy of Mahad Jebiy).

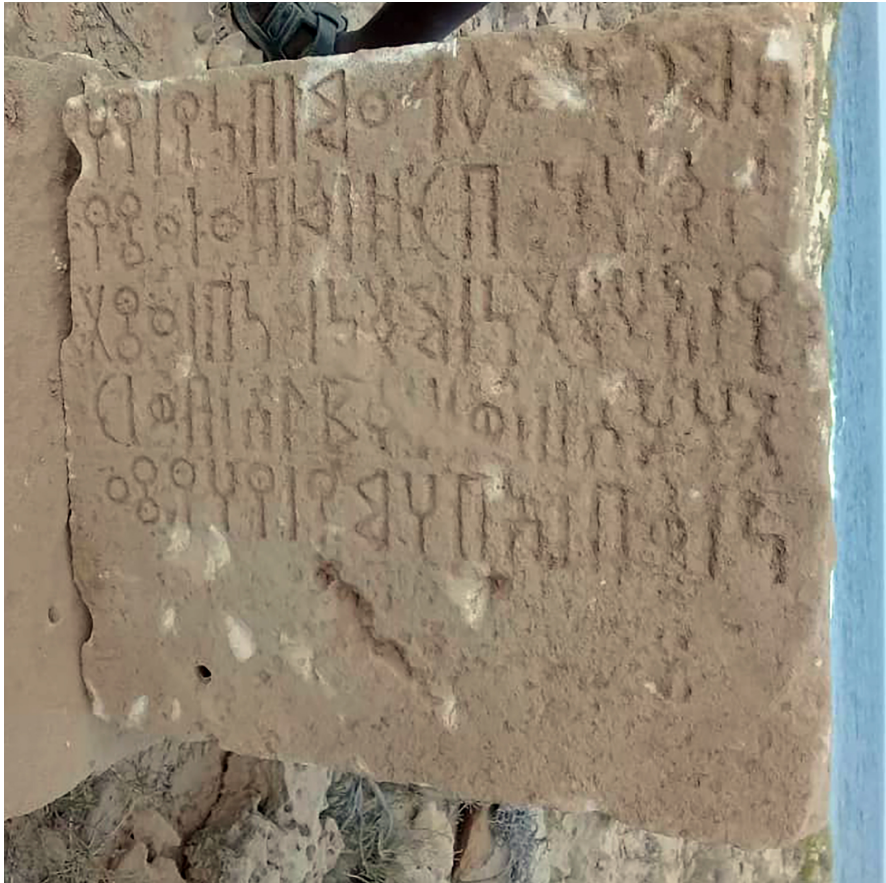


Figure 5: Inscription Bari 2021-2 (Courtesy of Mahad Jebiy).

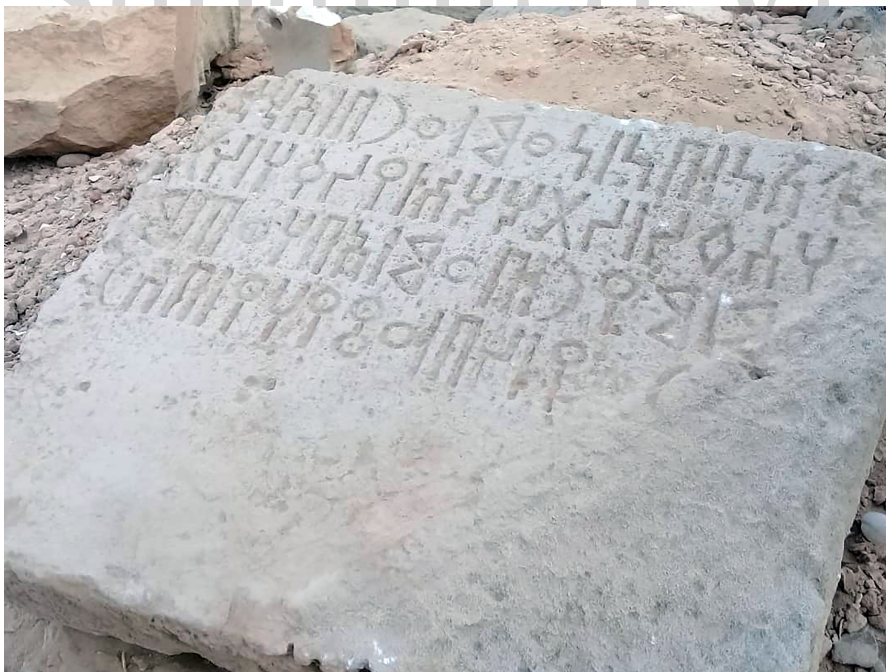


Figure 6: Inscription Bari 2021-3 (Courtesy of Mahad Jebiy).



Figure 7: Inscription Bari 2021-4 (Courtesy of Mahad Jebiy).



Figure 8: Inscription Bari 2021-5 (Courtesy of Mahad Jebiy).

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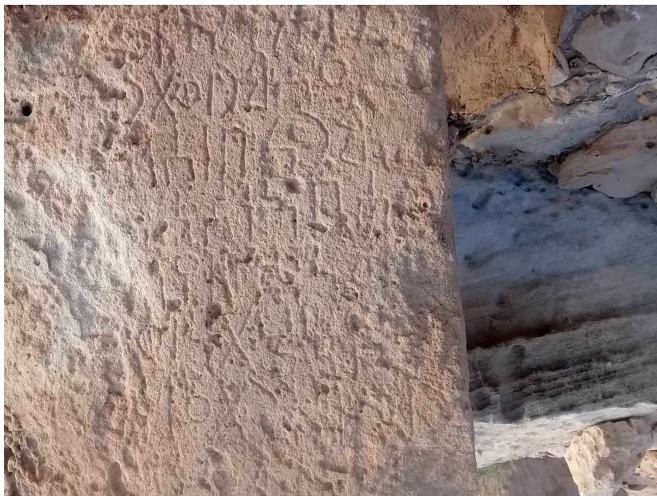


Figure 9: Inscription Bari 2021-6 (Courtesy of Mahad Jebiy).

Version

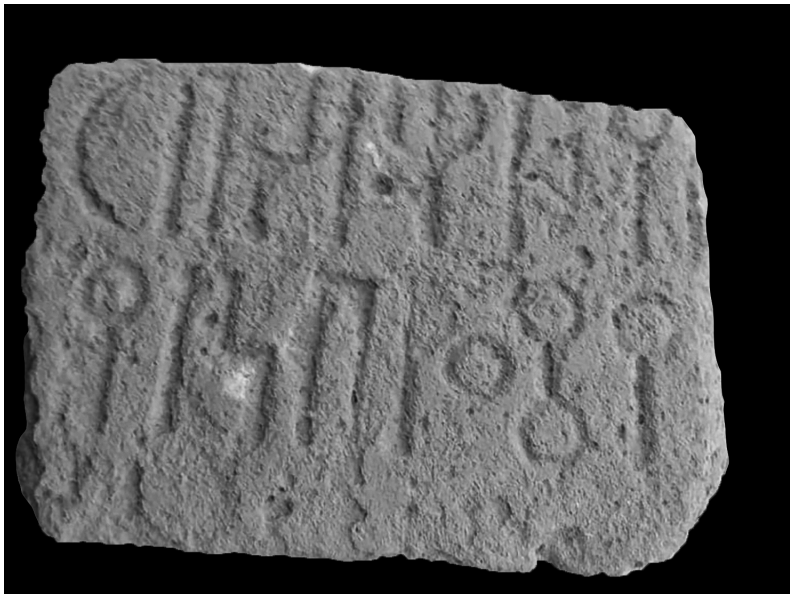


Figure 10: Inscription Bari 2021-7 (Courtesy of Mahad Jebiy).