South Arabian Long-Distance Trade in Antiquity

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"Out of Arabia"

Edited by

George Hatke and Ronald Ruzicka

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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

It is a great pleasure and honor for me to introduce you to this new collected volume on South Arabian Long-Distance Trade in Antiquity. Austria, and especially Vienna, has been a fruitful environment for Ancient South Arabian studies, and this is strongly connected with the person and work of Eduard Glaser. The Austrian Academy of Sciences hosts in its archive a large collection of squeezes, photographs, and diaries by Glaser, which served in the last decades as a source for eminent scholars such as Maria Höfner and Walter Dostal. In the Library, Archive and Collections at the AAS, the team around Petra Aigner achieved in two digitization projects the presentation of astonishing source material in the AAS, now accessible via http://glaser.acdh.oeaw.ac.at/.

Due to the manifold activities of Petra Aigner and her team, Ronald Ruzicka and George Hatke were able to organize the 23 Rencontres Sabéennes in Vienna, which took place from 13–15 June 2019. The title *Out of Arabia: South Arabian Long-Distance Trade in Antiquity* shows how the conference aimed to incorporate the Arabian Peninsula in the wider historical picture of political and economic relations in Antiquity. It was the first time that the Rencontres Sabéennes had convened in Vienna, paying tribute to the lively research on South Arabian Studies in the past and the present. The conference was organized by George Hatke and Ronald Ruzicka, who are also the editors of the present volume. The conference profited from the cooperation of the University of Vienna and the Institute of Oriental Studies, the Institute of Social Anthropology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the ACDH of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Digital Humanities Austria, and the Project ArcheoMuse. The conference enjoyed the attendance of participants from Austria, Germany, France, Italy, Russia, the USA, Jordan, and last but not least, Yemen. Organizing the travel to Austria for our guests from Yemen was made possible due to the indefatigable efforts of the organizing committee.

The keynote speech to the conference by Mohammed Maraqten opened the field with a talk about *The Pilgrimage to the Awām Temple/Maḥram Bilqīs, Ma'rib, Yemen*. The conference consisted of 32 lectures on various fields like archaeology, architecture, philology, epigraphy, ancient South Arabian history, and the history of scholarship. Twenty of the lectures are now collected in this volume, giving fresh insight to a field marginalized for

a long period of time. The volume will help to shed light on a fascinating region.

As members of the Library, Archive and Collections at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, we are deeply satisfied that the holdings of our institution have triggered projects and scholarship on Ancient South Arabia in the past; our hope is that the present volume will kindle more to come.

Sibylle Wentker,
Head of Library, Archive and Collections at the
Austrian Academy of Sciences
July 2020

INTRODUCTION

For over two decades, the annual Rencontres Sabéennes has brought together specialists in the field of ancient South Arabian studies. This field is concerned with the history, culture, and languages of the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, a region that encompasses the entirety of the modern-day Republic of Yemen, along with such neighboring regions as the oasis of Naǧrān in southwestern Saudi Arabia and Dhofar (Ẓufār) in southern Oman. South Arabian culture has always had a distinctive character of its own. A tribal society whose economy has historically been based primarily on agriculture, South Arabia has often been viewed—from the outside—as a highly parochial, inward-looking corner of the Near East. However, as hinted at in the title of this, the 23rd session of the Rencontres Sabéennes, *Out of Arabia*, South Arabian history is characterized by the region's outreach to foreign lands. Important though agriculture was in sustaining the South Arabian economy at its base, long-distance commerce was the primary raison d'être for South Arabia's outreach, and it is this commerce for which the region is most famous, be it through the legend of the Queen of Sheba with her caravan of exotica or through the writings of Graeco-Roman authors.

The papers presented in this volume reflect this theme of South Arabian outreach, whether in the form of contact with Ethiopia, the East African coast, East and North Arabia, or indeed with the Mediterranean and the rest of the Near East and more broadly. In some cases, South Arabian merchants traded in luxury items like gold, though more localized trade in products such as salt reminds us that the exchange of mundane items was also an integral part of South Arabian trade. In other cases, it was not goods but ideas about people closely associated with ancient South Arabia, such as the legendary Queen of Sheba and the sixth-century Aksumite king Kālēb, which were diffused. Contributions on the scholar-traveler Eduard Glaser and his Yemeni companion Ḥayyim Ḥabšūš highlight South Arabia's ability to not only export goods and ideas but also to attract outsiders to its lands, while other papers in this volume treating aspects of ancient South Arabian epigraphy and philology are sure to stimulate discussions as to the connections

between ancient South Arabia’s languages and the rest of the Semitic-speaking world.

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September 2020

CHAPTER ONE

SOUTH ARABIA, THE ARABS, AND THE EAST AFRICA TRADE IN PRE-ISLAMIC TIMES

GEORGE HATKE
VIENNA

Abstract

According to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Greek text dating from the mid-first century CE, a group whom the text's anonymous author calls Arabs played an important role in the maritime trade of Ḥimyar. This paper focuses on the Arab role in maritime trade with Azania, a coastal region in East Africa extending from southern Somalia to (and including) Tanzania. Trade with East Africa was not initiated by the Ḥimyarites, however, this study develops a theory put forward years ago by A. F. L. Beeston, to the effect that maritime links with East Africa were in fact first developed by Qatabān. It also makes the case that, during the period in which Ḥimyar dominated the southern part of Yemen's Red Sea coast, Arabs descended from groups based in the Red Sea littoral to the north of present-day Yemen and who had practiced a mixed economy that combined agro-pastoralism with trade, were recruited by the Ḥimyarites for commercial ventures as a means of integrating them into the socio-economic framework of the Ḥimyarite state.

Introduction

The history of pre-Islamic South Arabia is indelibly linked to the caravan trade.[1] Throughout most of the first millennium BCE, the caravan trade was indeed South Arabia's main link to the outside world. The evocative—if

[1] For an overview of the trans-Arabian caravan network, see de Maigret 2003.

most likely ahistorical—Biblical story of the Queen of Sheba,[2] with her caravan of camels bearing spices, gold, and precious stones, has solidified the link between South Arabia and the caravan trade in the popular imagination.[3] As is well known, however, goods passing to and from South Arabia also crossed the water. In fact, the end of the first millennium BCE witnessed an upsurge in long-distance maritime trade, and by the first century CE, South Arabian trade in the western Indian Ocean was in full swing. In this paper, it will be argued that, by the first century CE, groups of Arabs had become well integrated into South Arabia's network of maritime commerce, such that they handled much of the trade with Soqoṭrā, western India, and the East African coast. These Arabs, it should be noted, constituted a distinct group, quite different from the indigenous peoples of South Arabia. This was true ethnically as well as linguistically. Moreover, the differences between the Arabs and indigenous South Arabians were perceptible enough for the ancient texts to treat both groups as distinct peoples.

Our source of information on this Arab involvement in South Arabian maritime commerce is the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Greek text dating from the mid-first century CE. As we shall see, however, ASA (Ancient South Arabian) inscriptions provide useful data that complement and confirm the data provided by the *Periplus*, even if they do not directly address the issue of the Arab role in South Arabian sea trade. This paper shall examine the relevant material from the *Periplus* and the ASA corpus and will then present some possible reasons for Arab involvement. The case will be made that, with the increasing influx of Arabs from the north, the Ḥimyarites of South Arabia sought to integrate the newcomers into the society of the state by involving them in long-distance sea trade. It will be further hypothesized that this integration into the South Arabian economy normalized relations between South Arabians and Arabs, which became strained at times if one is to judge from ASA records of armed conflict between the two groups.

In part, the focus in this paper on Arab involvement with South Arabia's East Africa trade reflects the author's long-standing interest in the interaction between South Arabia and Africa during pre-Islamic times. Yet there are more important factors influencing the scope of this paper than the

[2] I Kings 10: 1-10, 13; II Chronicles 9: 1-9, 12.

[3] Socio-economic conditions in Palestine during the tenth century BCE, when the South Arabian queen is alleged to have visited Solomon, were poor, and can hardly have attracted foreign heads of state, while the references in the Biblical text to trade relations between Palestine and South Arabia are better suited to the seventh century BCE (Finkelstein and Silberman 2001: 123-45, esp. 143).

author's personal interests. The fact of the matter is that the *Periplus* provides more information on South Arabian trade with the East African coast, a region which it refers to as Azania, than on the Arabs' role in trade with Soqoṭrā and western India.[4] In addition, the anonymous author of the *Periplus* states that the kingdom of Ḥimyar actually ruled Azania, and that the Arab skippers and agents who managed trade with Azania intermarried with the region's indigenous inhabitants and could speak the local language. This suggests a degree of connectedness between Ḥimyar and Azania that has no parallel in the case of either Soqoṭrā or India. Finally, the subject of Azania and its commerce has usually been approached from an Africanist perspective, rather than from the perspective of a South Arabianist. This is, of course, perfectly understandable in light of Azania's location in Africa, as well as the tendency, beginning in the final quarter of the twentieth century, to push back against those more excessive diffusionist theories which sought to attribute all historical developments in pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa to foreign influence. Although this paper will, of course, take into account the African evidence that has a bearing on the topics discussed, the aim is not to reconstruct what life was like on the East African coast around the first century CE. Rather, it is to examine questions regarding pre-Islamic South Arabian trade with the East African coast that have thus far not been raised, much less answered, namely why the Arabs were involved with this trade and how South Arabia became interested in East Africa in the first place.

The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*

As the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* is the main text with which we shall be dealing, a brief overview of this work is in order. Written as a guide to the Red Sea and the western Indian Ocean, the text is preserved in the ninth-century *Codex Palatinus Graecus* 398 (ff. 40^{v}-54^{v}) and was long attributed—incorrectly—to the historian, Arrian of Nicomedia (d. post 145/146 CE) (Fig. 1-1).[5] It should be stressed that the title by which this text is now

[4] As we shall see, Soqoṭrā was, like Azania, ruled by a South Arabian kingdom, namely Ḥaḍramawt. Indeed, the *Periplus*' description of Soqoṭrā suggests that the island was more tightly controlled by Ḥaḍramawt than Azania was by Ḥimyar. Yet the Ḥaḍramī interaction with indigenous Soqoṭrīs would appear to have been minimal, given the fact that the *Periplus* says nothing directly about this population—much less does it speak of Ḥaḍramī intermarriage with Soqoṭrīs or Ḥaḍramī-Soqoṭrī bilingualism. What information the *Periplus* does supply on Soqoṭrā's population concerns the island's resident foreigners.

[5] De Romanis 2016: 97.

known is a modern one, as the original title is unknown.[6] Also unknown is the name of the real author of the text. In fact, the very issue of authorship is rather complicated, for there is some evidence that the *Periplus* incorporates data obtained from multiple informants.[7] While the author's name is unknown, scattered details in the *Periplus* strongly suggest that he was a resident of Egypt, most likely of Greek origin, or perhaps a Greek-speaking Egyptian. Thus his guide takes as its point of departure the port of Myos Hormos,[8] identified with the site of Quṣayr al-Qadīm on the Red Sea coast of Egypt.[9] Likewise indicative of the author's Egyptian background is his reference, in connection with South Arabian frankincense trees, to "some of the trees we have in Egypt,"[10] as well as his mention of Egyptian month names.[11] In addition, his use of verbs in the first person plural when describing standard sailing procedures in the Red Sea mark him as an insider of the Red Sea mariners' community.[12] Regarding the intended readership, De Romanis states that the *Periplus*

> was written for (and read by) an audience of Alexandrian merchants, financiers and prospective Indian Ocean sailors. The fastidious indexing of all the items both exported to and imported from each of the emporia of the Ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα,[13] together with the specification of the most appropriate departure times for each sea route—expressed in terms of both Roman and (fixed) Alexandrian calendars—clearly demonstrates that the text was meant to be a guide book for the cosmopolitan business community of Alexandria and Coptos.[14]

Regarding the content of the *Periplus*, Seland writes that the text provides

> information on what to buy and what to sell at the different ports. We are often told who rules the region described, what gifts should be brought to the local king or chief, and how visiting foreigners are perceived by the local inhabitants. The sailing directions are sketchier, but some distances are given, as are the best times to set out to different ports, basic information on

[6] Seland 2010: 14.
[7] De Romanis 2016: 100-4.
[8] *Periplus* §1.1.2.
[9] Bülow-Jacobsen et al. 1994.
[10] *Periplus* §29.9.27-8 (trans. Casson 1989: 67).
[11] ibid. §6.3.4-7; §14.5.7-8; §39.13.12-14; §49.16.31-2; §56.18.28-9.
[12] Arnaud 2012: 31-3; De Romanis 2016: 97 (n. 3).
[13] i.e., the "Red Sea," here referring not only to the Red Sea as commonly known but also to the Indian Ocean.
[14] De Romanis 2016: 106-7. Alexandria, of course, needs no introduction. As for Coptos, this was the Graeco-Roman name for the Upper Egyptian town known in Arabic as Qifṭ.

> how to make use of the monsoon for the haul across the open sea from Arabia or Africa to India and information about how to deal with difficult tides when approaching the Indian port of Barygaza in the Gulf of Khambhat.[15]

Invaluable though the *Periplus* is for our knowledge of Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade during the Roman period, it is a bit unbalanced in its coverage of the regions which it describes. Thus, while the *Periplus* covers a vast area extending from the Red Sea in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east, and from the port of Leukē Kōmē (=al-ʿAynūna)[16] in the north, located just outside the Gulf of ʿAqaba, to the Tanzanian coast in the south, its anonymous author does not appear to have visited all of these places. The vagueness with which he speaks of the Persian Gulf, for instance, suggests that he had never traveled there himself, while his descriptions of Soqoṭrā and the eastern coast of India similarly bespeak of his reliance on second-hand information.[17] As for South Arabia and the East African coast, the two regions that are the topic of this paper, the author of the *Periplus* seems to have been acquainted firsthand with the former as far east as Kanē (=Qāniʾ, modern Biʾr ʿAlī) on the southern coast of Yemen, while in the case of the latter, he seems to have been familiar with the region as far as the port of Opōnē (=Rās Ḥafūn), just south of Cape Guardafui.[18] This must be borne in mind when considering the accuracy of what the *Periplus* has to say regarding South Arabia, as opposed to the coastal regions of East Africa with which South Arabia-based merchants are reported to have conducted trade.

[15] Seland 2010: 14.
[16] On the identification of Leukē Kōmē with al-ʿAynūna, see Juchniewicz 2017.
[17] Seland 2010: 15.
[18] On the location of Opōnē, see ibid.; Casson 1989: 132; Hughes and Post 2016: 137.

Fig. 1-1: Map of the *Periplus*, drawn by the Belgian cartographer, Abraham Ortelius, in 1597. Public domain (https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid =15375710).

Although there has been a great deal of discussion about the date of the *Periplus* over the years, a mid-first century CE date has by now won near unanimous favor with scholars, with again the caveat that the text may incorporate earlier material. Various details in the *Periplus* itself give credence to a mid-first century CE time frame for the final compilation of the text. Among the most salient is a reference to one Malichus as a king of the Nabataeans.[19] Two Nabataean kings are known to have borne this name, of whom one, Malichus I (r. 59-30 BCE), belongs to the Late Hellenistic period and is thus too early for the *Periplus*,[20] describing as it does a period in which the Romans were trading in the Red Sea and the western Indian Ocean. This leaves us with Malichus II (r. 40-70 CE). Allusions in the text to the silk trade similarly suggest a first century CE date. The author of the *Periplus* knows of silk available from India, having been transported overland,[21] but nothing of the sea route supply via the Straits of Singapore

[19] *Periplus* §19.6.29.
[20] Kitchen 1994: 22.
[21] *Periplus* §49.16.30; §56.18.24; §64.21.13-15.

and the port of Óc Eo in southern Vietnam, with which the Kattigara of the *Geography* of Ptolemy (d. post-160 CE) can be identified.[22] According to the latter text, Kattigara was a fixed point along this maritime silk route, implying that the *Periplus* would have been out of date during the period in which Ptolemy was writing.[23] Finally, the reference in the *Periplus* to Parthian rule and various client-states of the Parthians in northwestern India[24] is consistent with a first-century CE time frame, given that Parthian principalities existed in that region down to 80-100 CE, but not later.[25]

South Arabia in the *Periplus*

In the *Periplus*, two South Arabian rulers are mentioned by name. The first was one Kharibaēl, "legitimate king of the two nations, the Homerite and the one, lying next to it, called the Sabaean" (ἔνθεσμος βασιλεὺς ἐθνῶν δύο, τοῦ τε Ὁμηρίτου καὶ τοῦ παρακειμένου λεγομένου Σαβαίτου), whose political base was Saphar, and who was a "friend of the [Roman] emperors" (φίλος τῶν αὐτοκρατόρων), with whom he exchanged "constant embassies and gifts" (συνεχέσι πρεσβείαις καὶ δώροις).[26] This second was Eleazos, king of what the *Periplus* calls "the frankincense-bearing land" (χώρα λιβανωτοφόρος), the political base of which was Saubatha.[27] Both of these kings can be identified in the ASA corpus, Kharibaēl with the Ḥimyarite king Karibʾīl Watar Yuhanʿim (r. ca. 40-50 CE)[28] and Eleazos with his contemporary, the Ḥaḍramī king ʾĪlīʿazz Yaluṭ.[29] As for the two political bases mentioned in the text, these can be identified with the Ḥimyarite capital of Ẓafār and the Ḥaḍramī capital of Šabwa respectively. The *Periplus*' statement that Kharibaēl held sway over the Ḥimyarite realm, as well as that of the Sabaeans, is similarly borne out by epigraphic data, as it is known that, during the first century CE, Ḥimyar and Sabaʾ formed a political union, with Ḥimyar as the dominant power. This situation is reflected in the royal title "King of Sabaʾ and Ḏū-Raydān" (*mlk sʿbʾ w-ḏ-rydn*)—Raydān being the name of the royal palace at the Ḥimyarite capital of Ẓafār.[30]

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[22] Kitchen 1994: 24.
[23] ibid.
[24] *Periplus* §38.13.3-4.
[25] Kitchen 1994: 24.
[26] *Periplus* §23.7.27-30 (trans. Casson 1989: 63).
[27] ibid. §27.9.4-5; §27.9.7-8 (trans. Casson 1989: 67).
[28] Robin 1991: 12.
[29] Avanzini 2016: 211.
[30] Robin 1991: 12; idem 2010: 358; Speidel 2015: 247; Avanzini 2016: 206.

That Kharibaēl was a friend of the Roman emperors signifies more than mere amicable relations. In fact, archaeological, numismatic, and epigraphic data from the first two centuries of the Common Era indicate that ties between Ḥimyar and Rome were quite close indeed during that period, and that the Romans even maintained a military presence, and through that, a sphere of political influence in the area of South Arabia encompassed by the united kingdom of Ḥimyar and Sabaʾ.[31] Epigraphic evidence for the stationing of Roman troops has come to light at Barāqiš[32] and on the Red Sea island of Farasān Kabīr.[33] That this Roman presence seems to have been tolerated by locals can be understood if one considers South Arabian concerns for security and political stability. United, the kingdoms of Ḥimyar and Sabaʾ constituted a stronger force than either would have alone, but this union remained a fragile one and did not last long. Throughout the second century CE and most of the third, Ḥimyarite-Sabaean relations were marked by violent conflict, not to mention conflict with Qatabān and Ḥaḍramawt.[34] This situation would have made it difficult for Ḥimyar to guard its own coastline, much less its shipping lanes. The obvious problems this created are indicated by the *Periplus*, which states that the inhabitants of the Ḥiğāz plundered and even enslaved those who strayed from the main shipping lanes,[35] while in a panegyric dating from ca. 144 CE, the Greek sophist Aelius Aristides alludes to the "wickedness" of the people of the Red Sea, most likely in reference to their piratical habits.[36] On land, travelers similarly faced threats from brigands. Thus, Doe 2, a Qatabānic text from the early first century CE, mentions "a raid of the Arabs in the valley of Kalśaf[um]" (*ġzwt*^{m} *bn ʿrb*^{n} *b-s*^{1}*r*^{n} *kls*^{3}*f*^{m}).[37] Given these conditions during the first and second centuries CE, one can appreciate why the Ḥimyarites—and no doubt other South Arabians as well—would have tolerated, if not welcomed, the security offered by a Roman presence,[38] even if this meant a certain degree of Roman influence in internal political affairs. Seen from this perspective, the "gifts" that the Ḥimyarites sent to Rome would likely have been some form of tribute and, if a fragment of the Greek author Phlegon of Tralles is to be believed, this continued into the mid-second

[31] Speidel 2015; cf. Bowersock 1997: 550-1; Nappo 2015 passim.
[32] Speidel 2015: 242-6.
[33] ibid.: 250; cf. Villeneuve et al. 2004.
[34] de Maigret 2009: 238-9.
[35] *Periplus* §20.7.7-9.
[36] Bowersock 2013: 54-5.
[37] http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=79&prjId=1&corId=14&colId=0&navId=294632818&recId=4458. Accessed on 28 December 2019.
[38] Schiettecatte 2012: 251.

century.[39] Similarly, Kharibaēl's status as a "legitimate" king is perhaps to be understood as a reflection of his official recognition by Rome as the rightful ruler of Ḥimyar.[40]

Such Roman influence did not, however, extend to the kingdom of Ḥaḍramawt to the east, over which Eleazos held sway. There, contact with the Roman world took a rather different form, that of commercial and cultural contact. The number of Roman ceramic imports that have come to light in the necropolis of Šabwa is quite small,[41] though there is certainly Graeco-Roman iconographic and stylistic influence in the decorations in the royal palace of Šabwa.[42] Evidence of Roman trade with Ḥaḍramawt around the time of the *Periplus* and thereafter is also evidenced by ceramics imported from the Roman Empire, including Eastern Sigillata A Ware, Eastern Sigillata B Ware, Terra Sigillata Ware, African Red Slip Ware, and Nabataean Ware, which have come to light at excavations at the Ḥaḍramī ports of Qāniʾ and Sumhūrām (=Ḫawr Rūrī).[43] Although the author of the *Periplus* speaks of a Greek community—presumably hailing from somewhere in the eastern part of the Roman Empire—on the island of Soqoṭrā,[44] then ruled by Ḥaḍramawt,[45] there is no reason to suppose that this community maintained a presence there in a military or political capacity.

An Arab Merchant Diaspora

Turning now to the Arab involvement in South Arabian maritime trade, as described in the *Periplus*, it is worth reiterating that the Arabs and the ASA-speaking peoples were two very distinct groups. In fact, when Arabs are mentioned in ASA inscriptions, whether by their tribal name or by the terms *ʿrb* /ʿarab/ and *ʾʿrb* /ʾaʿrāb/, they are treated as foreigners.[46] But if this gives us some idea as to who the Arabs of pre-Islamic times were not, it leaves open the question as to what the label "Arab" meant in a South Arabian context. Given the interest in ethnicity on the part of many contemporary historians, it comes as no surprise that a great deal of ink has been spilled in

[39] Bukharin 2012: 208.
[40] ibid.; Speidel 2015: 247.
[41] Japp 2004: 100.
[42] Audouin 1991; Dentzer-Feydy 2009.
[43] Japp 2004: 101.
[44] *Periplus* §30.10.7-11.
[45] ibid.: §31.10.19-20.
[46] For a thorough treatment of references to Arabs in ASA inscriptions, see Retsö 2003: 536-74. For a more succinct summary of such references, see idem 2005.

recent years over the question of Arab identity in pre-Islamic times.[47] In fact, pre-Islamic texts in which an individual self-identifies as Arab are few and far between, while the label "Arab" employed in texts left by non-Arabs must be treated with caution, as it cannot be assumed that all of those who were thus labeled would have self-identified as Arab—or, if they did, that they regarded this as the primary aspect of their identity.

So, who were the Arabs, as understood by the author of the *Periplus*? To answer that question, one must take into consideration the Arabic language, as this is often regarded as an integral aspect of Arab ethnicity. However, while there is some merit in this line of thought, the equation of Arabic speakers with Arabs is not without its problems. Even at the present time, when the link between the Arabic language and Arab ethnic identity is particularly strong, not all native speakers of Arabic self-identify as Arab. The Arabophone Jews of Yemen are a case in point. The *Periplus* itself is not immune to the problems posed by the ambiguities of Arab identity and its relationship to the Arabic language, as shown by its description of the Isle of Sarapis (=Maṣīra Island, off the southern coast of Oman).[48] According to the text, the island was inhabited by "holy men of the Ichthyophagoi" (ἀνθρώποις ἱεροῖς Ἰχθυοφάγων) who used the Arabic language (γλώσσῃ δὲ Ἀραβικῇ χρῶνται),[49] but who are not explicitly referred to as Arabs. In fact, the very reference to the Arabic language in this passage is problematic, as it is by no means certain that either the author of the *Periplus* or his informant(s) had an accurate idea of what constituted "Arabic," or would have been able to distinguish it from the other Semitic languages spoken in South Arabia.[50] Given that the inhabitants of Maṣīra continued to speak Mehrī—one of the languages of the Modern South Arabian (MSA) branch of Semitic—at least as late as the thirteenth century,

[47] See, for example, Hoyland 2007; Macdonald 2009; Millar 2010; Fisher 2011; Webb 2016. See also Retsö 2003, a monograph which is controversial—and not widely accepted—in its conclusions, though still useful as a survey of the relevant primary sources.

[48] On the identification of Sarapis with Maṣīra Island, see Casson 1989: 175.

[49] *Periplus* §33.11.16 (trans. Casson 1989: 71). On the epithet Ichthyophagoi, i.e. "Fish-Eaters," a rather nebulous term designating various coastal peoples spread out over a vast area extending from Northeast Africa to the Indus, see Hatke 2019: 16 (and the sources cited therein). What the *Periplus* means by "holy men" in the context of Sarapis is not clear, though it is possible that they were soothsayers or magicians of the sort described in medieval Arabic sources in connection with both pre-Islamic Arabia and the MSA-speaking peoples during the Islamic period (ibid.: 18-19).

[50] Reliance on informants can be assumed in this case given that, as noted above, the author of the *Periplus* had no direct knowledge of any region to the east of Qāniʾ.

one should at least entertain the idea that the "Arabic" to which the *Periplus* refers in connection with the holy men of Sarapis was an early form of Mehrī, rather than the Arabic language (*al-ʿarabiyya*) as commonly understood.[51]

In the *Periplus*, people who are called Arabs are closely associated with Muza (=al-Muḫāʾ), a port on Yemen's Red Sea coast.[52] In the form *mḫwⁿ*, this port is mentioned in a handful of Sabaic inscriptions, albeit inscriptions which postdate the *Periplus* by several centuries.[53] It is likely that the name Muza is related to that of Wādī Mawzaʿ, whose outlet forms a delta immediately to the south of al-Muḫāʾ.[54] The port is first mentioned, again in association with Arabs, in the section of the *Periplus* that deals with Azania, which shall be treated below. For the time being, it suffices to quote the reference to al-Muḫāʾ that appears in the section dealing with South Arabia.

> Τὸ μὲν ὅλου Ἀράβων, ναυκληρικῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ ναυτικῶν, πλεονάζον δὲ καὶ τοῖς ἀπὸ ἐμπορίας πράγμασι κινεῖται συγχρῶνται γὰρ τῇ τοῦ πέραν ἐργασίᾳ καὶ βαρυγάζων ἰδίοις ἐξαρτισμοῖς.[55]
>
> The whole place teems with Arabs—shipowners or charterers and sailors—and is astir with commercial activity, for they share in the trade across the water and with Barygaza, using their own outfits.[56]

This is a highly revealing passage. As Retsö very astutely notes regarding the anonymous author's choice of terms,

> [i]t is as if a skipper, having visited Liverpool, Newcastle, and London, reported that the towns were full of Englishmen. Were not all the other inhabitants Arabs as well? Possibly, but [the author of the *Periplus*] does not say so.[57]

Most probably, the author employed the ethnonym "Arab" here to distinguish groups identified and/or self-identifying as such from the majority population

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[51] Hatke 2019: 17-18.
[52] Casson 1989: 147-8; Schiettecatte 2011: 233.
[53] Note Ir 28, dating from the reign of the Ḥimyarite king Karibʾīl Watar Yuhanʿim (ca. 312-315 CE) (al-Iryānī 1973: 147); as well as three inscriptions dating from the reign of the Ḥimyarite king Yōsef ʾAsʾar Yaṯʾar (ca. 522-525 CE): Ja 1028/4; Ry 507/5.10; and Ry 508/3 (Müller 2010: 98, 101, 103, 104).
[54] Schiettecatte 2011: 233.
[55] *Periplus* §21.7.21-23.
[56] Trans. Casson 1989: 63.
[57] Retsö 2003: 421.

of South Arabia. The latter would thus have been a group distinct from the Arabs, as is also implied by the references to Arabs in Sabaic inscriptions. Although this passage from the *Periplus* is illuminating as a source for South Arabian ethnography in the first century CE, it still sheds no light on who these Arabs were or how they cohered as a distinct group. While the *Periplus* associates the Arabic language, but not Arab ethnicity, with the holy men of the Ichthyophagoi on Maṣīra Island, it identifies a segment of the population of al-Muḫāʾ as ethnically Arab without, however, so much as a single word about the Arabic language. Where the text speaks of language at all in connection with the Arabs of al-Muḫāʾ, it mentions only that those who traded with Azania spoke the local language of that region.[58] If these Arabs spoke some early form of Arabic as their mother tongue, the *Periplus* says nothing about it.

Sabaic inscriptions are a bit more informative in that, where they do speak of Arabs in connection with a geographical region, they often associate them with the area between the oasis of Naǧrān and the town of Qaryat Ḏāt-Kāhil^{am} (=Qaryat al-Fāw), i.e. the southwestern corner of present-day Saudi Arabia. As we have seen, however, the reference to a raid by Arabs was already documented in the first century CE in the Qatabānic inscription Doe 2. The author has been unable to locate the "valley of Kalśaf^{um}" in which the raid took place, and which is mentioned by name only in Doe 2. Since, however, the inscription is not only Qatabānic but also mentions a pilgrimage to the temple of a deity, ʿAṯtar Lord of Baśr^{um}, known only from the area ruled by Qatabān,[59] and associates the Qatabānian god ʿAmm with his sanctuary at Ḫuḍray, a toponym that can be identified with Ǧabal Ḫuḍrā to the south of the Qatabānian town of Ḏū-Ġayl^{im} (=Haǧar bin Ḥumayd), one can deduce that the raid took place within Qatabānian territory, most likely in the Wādī Bayḥān region that constituted the kingdom's core. Thus, the Arabs were capable of launching raids well into the South Arabian interior by the first century CE, must likely via the Ramlat al-Sabaʿtayn Desert.

Evidence of an influx of peoples from the north can also be detected at the philological level. Lexical and morphological features more at home in North Arabia—a number of which are directly paralleled by Arabic—are evident in Sabaic inscriptions from Haram (=Ḫaribat Hamdān), dedicated by members of ʾAmīr^{um}, a tribe hailing from Naǧrān which settled in Wādī

[58] See below.

[59] Robin 2012b: 340-1 and passim. Bāfaqīh-Bāṭāyiʿ al-Ḥadd II-2, a Sabaic rock inscription dating from the beginning of the second century BCE, also mentions the sanctuary of Baśr^{um} (ibid.: 337), but was carved at a site, Ṣanāʿ Āl Zayn, that lay within a region formerly ruled by Qatabān.

al-Ǧawf at the end of the first millennium BCE.[60] Here they carved out a niche for themselves as caravaneers who handled much of South Arabia's overland commerce.[61] It is tempting to identify the ʾAmīrites as Arabs, if not necessarily Arabs of the sort who operated out of al-Muḫāʾ. It must be stressed, though, that no ʾAmīrite ever self-identifies as Arab, nor is it evident that the ʾAmīrites were counted among the peoples whom Sabaic inscriptions designate as "Arabs." Also, while the linguistic idiosyncrasies in the ʾAmīrites' inscriptions do display similarities with Arabic, these are not sufficiently diagnostic to allow identification with Old Arabic, or indeed with any of the other Ancient North Arabian (ANA) languages.[62] In fact, some features, like the conjunction *hn* "that," serving to introduce a subordinate clause, are not Arabic at all.[63] The ʾAmīrite presence in South Arabia is thus irrelevant for our understanding of who the seafaring Arabs based at al-Muḫāʾ were.

As we have seen, the Arabs of al-Muḫāʾ were sufficiently distinct from indigenous South Arabians to merit special mention in the *Periplus* as Arabs, and since the Tihāma coast which they inhabited appears to have been a region with which the author of the text had direct acquaintance, we should probably take his word seriously. For lack of any better alternative, it is tentatively posited here that those Arabs whom the *Periplus* associates with South Arabia belonged to the same, or related, tribal groups inhabiting the Tihāma which Sabaic inscriptions seem to distinguish from indigenous South Arabians. Although the term "Arabs" (*ʿrb* or *ʾʿrb*) is not applied to the tribes of the Tihāma as it is to the Arab tribes hailing from Nağrān and areas further north, their foreign origin is suggested by the fact that they are referred to in Sabaic inscriptions using the term *ʿs²rt*, derived from Arabic *ʿašīra* "clan," rather than the term *s²ʿb*, applied to the indigenous tribes of the South Arabian heartland. A few of these tribes of the Tihāma are known by name from Sabaic inscriptions: tribes such as ʾAšʿār^{ān}, ʿAkk^{um}, and Ḏū-Sahrat^{am}. Such groups are also associated in Sabaic inscriptions with a type

[60] al-Saʿīd 2018: 407; Agostini 2018: 356.
[61] von Wissmann 1964: 128-35; Bron 2008: 457.
[62] Macdonald 2000: 55. ANA includes such languages as Safaitic, Dedanitic, Taymanitic, Hismaic, and Old Arabic and is documented in a corpus of mostly short inscriptions and graffiti scattered across northwestern Saudi Arabia and neighboring parts of Syria and Jordan. On this (admittedly not well-defined) group of languages, see Macdonald 2000: 29-30, 41-6, 48-53, 54-5; idem 2004 passim; Al-Jallad 2015 passim.
[63] Al-Jallad 2013: 228.

of settlement referred to—exclusively in the plural form—as *ʾdwr* or *ʾdyr*,[64] as opposed to the standard, pan-ASA term for settlement, *hgr* (pl. *ʾhgr*). If the use of different terminology is any indication, the social structure of these tribes differed from that of their indigenous South Arabian counterparts. The Arabs whom the author of the *Periplus* associates with al-Muḫāʾ would most likely have belonged to the foreign enclave based in the Tihāma which, according to Sabaic inscriptions, had distinctive forms of settlements and tribal identity.

These Arabs need not have been descended from those who hailed from the region between Nağrān and Qaryat Ḏāt-Kāhil[am]. Rather, their ancestors were more likely related to the groups based along the Ḥiğāzī coast who are alluded to in the *Periplus*. Too little archaeological research has been conducted on that coast to allow for the identification of these groups in the archaeological record, though there are references to the population of that region in Graeco-Roman sources pre-dating the *Periplus*. Quoting the second-century BCE geographer, Agatharchides, Diodorus Siculus (d. post-30 BCE) writes of the Arabian coastline stretching southwards from the Nabataean realm, alluding, among other things, to sacred sites, including one located on an island that had remains of dwellings and stelae inscribed in some barbarian language.[65]

In a later passage, we are informed that the stretch of coast further south was inhabited by a people called the Thamudeni (Ἄραβες οἱ καλούμενοι Θαμουδηνοί),[66] i.e. Ṯamūd, a group based in the northern Ḥiğāz whose name is attested in various forms from the late eighth century BCE to the fourth century CE.[67] South, in turn, of the Ṯamūdites dwelled another

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[64] cf. Yemeni Arabic *dēr* "kleines Dorf […] vor allem in der Tihāma" (Behnstedt 1993: 77).

[65] Diodorus Siculus, *Library* §3.44.2-3, cf. Pliny, *Natural History* §6.32.150. The language in which these inscriptions were written might well have belonged to ANA. Indeed, some ANA graffiti were found and copied by the British traveler, James Wellsted in 1830 in the vicinity of al-Waǧh, located on the northern Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia (Wellsted 1838 [II]: 189). The copy of the graffiti which Wellsted published on the same page is, alas, basically unreadable. (The author wishes to thank Michael Macdonald for bringing this reference to his attention.) Significantly, al-Waǧh was linked to the oasis of al-ʿUlā, an important station on the trans-Arabian caravan route, via a camel road that was frequented by merchants into the modern period (Bukharin 2012: 197-8).

[66] Diodorus Siculus, *Library* §3.44.6.

[67] Ṯamūd (Akkadian LÚ *ta-mu-di*) first appears during the reign of the Neo-Assyrian king Sargon II (721-705 BCE) as one of several North Arabian peoples attacked by the Assyrians in 715 BCE (Retsö 2003: 149). During the Roman period, Ṯamūd is mentioned in a number of sources, among them bilingual Greek-Nabataean Aramaic

people called the Debae, who bred camels and used these both in warfare as well as to transport their wares.[68] The reference to the latter use of camels is interesting in light of what is said about the gold trade which the Debae conducted with Boeotian and Peloponnesian Greeks.[69] Rock-drawings from northwestern Saudi Arabia representing ships do indeed indicate that the populations dwelling to the north of South Arabia were linked to maritime trade,[70] but with insufficient data regarding their date, it is difficult to tie this material to specific groups like the Debae during the Hellenistic period. The geographer, Strabo (d. post-23 CE), also basing himself on the account of Agatharchides, adds that some of the Debae were nomads while others were farmers.[71]

Further south still, a bit to the north of the Sabaeans' territory, two other peoples (Ἄραβων), the Alilaei and the Gasandi[72] are said to have inhabited a fertile land that also produced gold, which they exported in exchange for copper and iron.[73] Von Wissmann identifies the region which these two groups inhabited with southwestern Saudi Arabia, linking the Alilaei with the port of Ḍankān on the coast of ʿAsīr and the Gasandi with Ǧazān.[74] In the case of the latter, however, Cuvigny and Robin,[75] followed by Bukharin,[76] prefer an identification with Ġassān, an Arab tribe which, though most famous as a client of Rome based in the Arabian borderlands

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inscription from Ruwāfa in northwestern Saudi Arabia (Macdonald et al. 2015: 53-6) and a fragment of Uranius dating from 300 CE alluding to the Thamouda as neighbors of the Nabataeans (Retsö 2003: 491-2). Ṯamūd ceased to exist as a group sometime thereafter, but had been influential enough for its memory to be preserved in the Qurʾān, where it is mentioned in no fewer than twenty-one chapters, albeit as a nation of godless unbelievers (Firestone 2006).

[68] Diodorus Siculus, *Library* §3.45.3-4. Bukharin 2009-10: 100 identifies the Debae with a group called Dawʾat who are known from Sabaic inscriptions, though the inscriptions in question date from the third century CE (Cuvigny and Robin 1996: 717), long after the lifetime of Agatharchides. It is not impossible, though, that Dawʾat incorporated descendants of the Debae.

[69] Diodorus Siculus, *Library* §3.45.5-6. Von Wissmann 1975: 62 speculates that the very name Debae (Δέβαι) is derived from Arabic *ḏahab* "gold."

[70] Bukharin 2012: 198.

[71] Strabo, *Geography* §16.4.18.

[72] Von Wissmann 1975: 62 (n. 1) believes that "[d]ie Ἀλιλαῖοι sind wahrscheinlich mit den (Banī) Ḥilāl, vielleicht in der Form ʾḥlln, ʾAḥlālān, gleichzusetzen," though no such group is known from the ASA corpus.

[73] Diodorus Siculus, *Library* §3.45.6-8.

[74] Von Wissmann 1975: 62.

[75] Cuvigny and Robin 1996: 705-6.

[76] Bukharin 2009-10: 107.

of Syria-Palestine, inhabited a more southerly location, around Yaṯrib, as late as the mid-fourth century CE.[77] Yaṯrib, however, is located nowhere near the area in which Agatharchides locates the Alilaei and the Gasandi and, while one cannot exclude the possibility that the Ġassānids might have migrated to the Ḥiğāz from a region located still further south, hard evidence to that effect is lacking.[78]

In conclusion, then, the Red Sea coast was, during the third century BCE, inhabited by various groups,[79] among whom camel herding seems to have played an important role, though some groups, namely the Debae, had a mixed economy that included farming as well as pastoralism. The gold trade was another important component in the local economy, and in this connection, it should be noted that gold mines are indeed found throughout West Arabia, including the regions inhabited by Agatharchides' Arabs.[80] Radiocarbon analysis of residual charcoal in slag from the Mahd al-Ḏahab gold mine in the Ḥiğāz indicates mining activity at that site as far back as the tenth century BCE, confirming the exploitation of West Arabian gold during antiquity, already well before Agatharchides' time.[81] Apart from a passing reference to Nabataean pirates,[82] Agatharchides makes no reference to West Arabian Arabs engaging in maritime activities themselves, though such a scenario is certainly conceivable. Whatever the case, these Arabs clearly had commercial ties to the outside world. They traded with the Greeks and, given the location of their territories astride the main artery of the trans-Arabian caravan route, would undoubtedly have also traded with South Arabians. Contact with the latter may well have alerted them to the economic opportunities in South Arabia itself and, as a working hypothesis,

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[77] ʿAbadān 1, a Sabaic inscription dating from 360 CE, locates Ġassān in the area of Yaṯrib (Robin 2014a: 2 [n. 3], 27, 36-7).

[78] Although medieval Arab genealogists classify Ġassān as Qaḥṭānid, i.e. South Arabian, genealogical traditions often reflect an Islamic-period rationalization of the tribal geography of Arabia, often motivated by political interests, and should therefore be treated with a certain amount of skepticism.

[79] That these groups are called Arabs in the version of Agatharchides quoted by Diodorus may be less significant than would appear at first sight. As quoted by Strabo and Photius (d. 893 CE), the same passage makes no reference to the Arab ethnicity of these peoples, suggesting that their identification as Arabs originated with Diodorus (Retsö 2003: 298-9). This, however, has no bearing on the question of the origins of those Arabs who settled in the Tihāma and who are alluded to in the *Periplus* and, at most, indicates that the label of "Arab" might have broadened in usage between the Agatharchides' lifetime and that of Diodorus.

[80] Von Wissmann 1975: 58-9; Heck 1999 passim.

[81] Heck 1999: 381.

[82] Diodorus Siculus, *Library* §3.43.5.

one may posit that their descendants were the Arabs with whom al-Muḫāʾ is said to have teemed. Although their maritime experience in earlier centuries remains a moot point, the fact that they had for centuries inhabited areas on or near the coast meant that they surely had some familiarity with the sea. As we shall observe below in the *Discussion and Conclusion* section, the Rašāyda Arabs of eastern Sudan who, like the Debae, have historically had a mixed agro-pastoral economy, have also come to engage in maritime activities.

The passage quoted above from the *Periplus* gives us some idea of the scale of the maritime activities in which the Arabs of al-Muḫāʾ engaged by referring to their trade with Barygaza, a town identified with Bharuch on the western coast of India.[83] Although the *Periplus* does not at this point specify what merchandise these Arab merchants brought to Barygaza, a later passage that describes Barygaza in detail alludes to the importation of Italian, Laodicean (i.e. Latakian), and Arabian wine.[84] In his commentary on the *Periplus*, Casson opines that "[t]he Arabian wine very likely came from Muza."[85] This is not an implausible hypothesis, for ASA inscriptions indicate that the Yemeni highlands, with which al-Muḫāʾ was in direct contact, was the main center of viticulture in South Arabia.[86] In addition, possible archaeological evidence for the South Arabian export of wine to India is suggested by the discovery of straw-tempered ovoid jars of South Arabian manufacture at Pattanam on India's Kerala coast,[87] of a sort associated with the consumption of wine in South Arabia.[88] As for other exports to India, South Arabia was of course famed for its aromatic resins. However, while myrrh is listed among the exports of al-Muḫāʾ in the *Periplus*,[89] most of the South Arabian frankincense acquired by Indian merchants—including those from Barygaza—would have been obtained at the Ḥaḍramī port of Sumhūrām, located far to the east.[90]

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[83] Casson 1989: 199-200. Pliny the Elder similarly notes that Muza was a port at which merchants called while en route to India (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* §6.26.104).
[84] *Periplus* §49.16.20-1.
[85] Casson 1989: 207.
[86] Of the extant references to viticulture in ASA inscriptions, some sixteen relate to the northern and southern highlands of Yemen, more than any other region in South Arabia (Sima 2000: 259).
[87] Buffa 2015: 58.
[88] ibid.: 57-8.
[89] *Periplus* §24.8.9.
[90] ibid. §32.10.29-§32.11.4.

The port of al-Muḫāʾ might have been the economic center of the seafaring Arabs based in South Arabia, though it was by no means their only settlement. Another Red Sea anchorage, Okēlis (=Šayḫ Saʿīd in Ḥawr Ġurayra)[91] is described by the *Periplus* as an "Arab village" (Ἀράβων κώμη).[92] It is said to have belonged to the same province (i.e. that of Maʿāfirum) to which al-Muḫāʾ also belonged, and of which Sauē (=Śawām, modern al-Sawā) was the capital.[93] In contrast to al-Muḫāʾ, Okēlis is said to have been less a port of trade than a harbor and watering station for those intent on sailing onward to other destinations.[94] The name Okēlis itself may well be of Arabic origin and might reflect the site's importance as a source of water. Comparable toponyms include ʿAql, which Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 1229 CE) refers to as a fortress (*ḥiṣn*) in the Tihāma,[95] while Bukharin compares the Arabic term *ʿuqla* "espace, où, en quelque points qu'on déblayer le sable, on est assure de trouver de l'eau [sic]" and notes the site of al-ʿUqla (ancient ʾAnwādum) as well as the names of two wells in Oman, ʿAqalat al-Naḫla and ʿAqalat al-Rims.[96] Bukharin suggests that the name Okēlis is related to al-ʿAql, a toponym near the Bāb al-Mandab mentioned by the medieval Arab scholar, Naǧm al-Dīn Aḥmad bin Ḥamdān al-Ḥarrānī (d. 1295 CE) in his *Kitāb Ǧāmiʿ al-Funūn wa-Salwat al-Maḥzūn*.[97] Material evidence of commercial activity at Šayḫ Saʿīd during antiquity, albeit dating from a later period, is provided by a hoard of Aksumite Ethiopian gold coins found at the site.[98]

Okēlis is known from a handful of other texts. As quoted by Strabo, the Hellenistic geographer, Artemidorus Ephesius (fl. 100 BCE) refers to a promontory on the Arabian side of the Bāb al-Mandab called Akila (Ἀκίλα),[99] which can be identified with the Okēlis of the *Periplus*. Pliny the Elder (d. 79 CE) similarly refers to a port called Oceli-, though he seems to confuse this with Cane (=Qāniʾ), located far to the east on Yemen's southern coast.[100] For his part, Ptolemy refers to Okēlis as a "semi-island,"[101] as well

[91] Casson 1989: 157-8; Schiettecatte 2011: 235-6.
[92] *Periplus* §25.8.19 (trans. Casson 1989: 65).
[93] ibid. On the site of Śawām and its identification with the Sauē of the *Periplus*, see Schiettecatte 2011: 238-9.
[94] *Periplus* §25.8.19-20.
[95] Yāqūt 1868 (III): 698.
[96] Bukharin 2012: 189.
[97] ibid.: 188.
[98] Hahn 2000: 285 (n. 13).
[99] Strabo, *Geography* §16.4.5.
[100] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* §6.26.104.
[101] Ptolemy, *Geography* §1.15.11 (quoted in Bukharin 2012: 188)