Arabian Names

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Introduction

The term 'Arabian' in cuneiform sources is primarily geographic, covering a range of toponyms, ethnonyms, and anthroponyms ultimately stemming from the arid regions to the west and south of Mesopotamia. As such, the term encompasses a wide array of languages, some known and attested independently in the Arabian epigraphic record, such as Sabaic and Taymanitic. In other cases, the cuneiform sources constitute our only evidence for the shadowy vernaculars of North Arabia and the Syrian Desert in the first millennium BCE. During this period, Arabia was home to several independent writing traditions that made use of variants of the South Semitic alphabet, a sister script to the Phoenico–Aramaic script. There thrived a rich writing culture in the south-western corner of the Peninsula, in what is today Yemen. Four principal languages are encountered in the epigraphic record: Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, and Hadramitic (Stein 2011). The oases of North and West Arabia also boasted their own scripts and dialects: Dadanitic (at Dadān, mod. al-ʿUlā), Taymanitic (at Taymāʾ), and Dumaitic (at Dūmat, mod. Dūmat al-Jandal) (Macdonald 2000). These materials provide important comparanda when trying to identify Arabian names in cuneiform transcription and in trying to locate their source.

Historical Background

Beginning in the Neo-Assyrian period, contacts between Arabians and Mesopotamian states begin to increase. The Neo-Assyrians carried out several military campaigns against the inhabitants of northern Arabia, specifically targeting the oasis city of Adummatu, mod. Dūmat al-Jandal (Ephʿal 1984, 20–53). At the same time, these sources record a growing presence of Arabians in Babylonia (Ephʿal 1974). A number of inscriptions

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in the South Semitic alphabet – written on seals and clay tablets – have also been discovered in the environs of Babylonia, independently attesting to the presence of Arabian groups in the region (Sass 1991, 43–68).

Principles for Distinguishing Arabian Names in Babylonian Sources

Arabian names in Babylonian sources are usually identified on the basis of linguistic features that distinguish them from Northwest and East Semitic. One of the most salient isoglosses is the preservation of word-initial *w*, which has merged with *y* in the Northwest Semitic languages, and the presence of a non-etymological word-final *u* – what is termed *wawation* (Al-Jallad 2022). Arabian names are also identified based on their association with groups of people labelled 'Arabian' in the sources, as well as on the basis of etymology (Zadok 1981, §1). The number of Arabian anthroponyms, tribal names, and toponyms in first millennium BCE Babylonian sources is comparatively small but nevertheless attests to the growing presence of Arabians in southern Babylonia and the importance of Arabia in trade and other external affairs of the country.

Toponyms

In 552 BCE, Nabonidus, the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, campaigned in North Arabia and conquered several oasis settlements. The Harran stele (Schaudig 2001, 486–99; Weiershäuser and Novotny 2020 no. 47) furnishes us with the longest list of Arabian toponyms:

  ^{uru}*te-ma-a*: This refers to the North Arabian oasis town of Taymāʾ, attested in the local Taymanitic inscriptions as *tmʾ* (Eskoubi 1999, 239–41; Hayajneh 2001, 81–95). It is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as תֵּימָא (Jeremiah 25:23).

  ^{uru}*da-da-(nu)*: Dadān was an important oasis to the southwest of Taymāʾ, also mentioned in Jeremiah 25:23 as דְּדָן. The town boasted its own script and writing tradition (Macdonald 2000; Kootstra 2023). The name is attested both in the inscriptions of Taymāʾ and Dadān as *ddn*.

  ^{uru}*pa-dak-ku*: This renders *fadak*, an Arabian oasis southwest of Dadān, located near the modern site of al-Ḥāʾiṭ, and which carries the same name today (Hausleiter and Schaudig 2016, 236–7). It is unclear whether the plosive *p* in cuneiform transcription is a faithful representation of the town's name or whether the use of *pa-* was simply an

approximation of the spirantised *f*, characteristic of Arabic today. A cuneiform inscription of Nabonidus has been discovered at this site, possibly mentioning the name of the settlement as *p*[*a-dak-ku*] (Hausleiter and Schaudig 2016).

^{uru}*ḫi-ib-ra-a*: This appears to render the name of the oasis of Khaybar, which is about 60 kilometres as the bird flies southwest of Fadak. The spelling, however, does not match its current name, which goes back at least to the seventh century CE. Like *te-ma-a*, it appears that the oasis' name in the middle of the first millennium BCE was Ḥibrāʔ.

^{uru}*iá-di-ḫu*: This oasis lies about sixty kilometres south of *pa-dak-ku* and is known today as al-Ḥuwayyiṭ, but locals apparently still know the uninhabited site as *yadīˤ* (Hausleiter and Schaudig, *forthcoming*). The anthroponym *ydˤ* is common in the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions and may suggest that the town bore the name of a person (Harding 1971, 663).

^{uru}*iá-at-ri-bu*: The final site on Nabonidus' campaign is today the most well-known and important of these settlements, *yaṯrib*, the capital of Mohammad's state and the site of his burial. The cuneiform spelling is a faithful transcription of the Arabian name. It is next attested in an undated Nabataean inscription from the area of al-ˤUlā (Al-Theeb 2002 no. 163), and finally in Islamic-period sources, where its name was officially changed to al-Madīnah.

Ethnonyms

The Arabians mentioned in cuneiform sources belong to several social groups, ranging from the macro-identity, *arab*, to tribes and smaller clans and families.

^{lú/kur}*a-ra-bi*: The term 'Arab', which first appears in Neo-Assyrian documents, is an umbrella label covering the inhabitants of the 'distant desert' of North Arabia, and sometimes elsewhere. Not all whom this title encompasses identified as a self-conscious community or were necessarily speakers of a language we would call Arabic (Macdonald 2009). By the eighth century BCE, Arabian groups had settled in southern Babylonia, in the territories of Bīt-Dakkūri and Bīt-Amukāni (Ephˤal 1974). A settlement called Ālu-ša-Arbāyi 'City of the Arabians' was located near Nippur (Zadok 1977, 224–7). It seems clear that *arab* was a macro-label encompassing several ethnic/social groups, as evidenced by the compound name *te-mu-da-a ar-ba-a-a*,

which could refer to an Arabian, belonging to the tribe/clan of Thamūd (Zadok 1977, 224–7).

[uru]*qi-da-ri*: Zadok (1981, 66) suggests a connection between this toponym, which is attested in a Neo-Babylonian document from Nippur (BE 8/1 65), with Neo-Assyrian *qid-ri-na*, an Arabian settlement in Bīt-Dakkūri possibly named after the large Arabian confederacy of Qedar. The name is attested in the Bible (Gen 25:13; 1 Chron 1:29), and a Qedarite king, Gušam son of ʿAmru, offered a votive bowl to the deity *hnʾlt* 'the Goddess' at Tell al-Maskhūṭah in the Nile Delta (Rabinowitz 1956). The vocalisation in cuneiform transcription – alongside the spelling of the name in the Tell al-Maskhūṭah bowl as *qdr* – suggests an original pronunciation of *qidar* rather than *qaydar*.

[lú]*sa-ba-ʾ*, [lú]*ša-ba-ʾ-a-a*: This term transcribes the name of one of the four principal states of South Arabia, *sabaʾ*, mentioned in the Bible as שְׁבָא (e.g., Gen 25:3). Some have suggested that the references to the Sabaeans in cuneiform texts are in fact to a trading outpost in the Ḥigāz, perhaps near Dadān, rather than to the kingdom itself (Macdonald 1997; Retsö 2003, 135). The spelling of the name with *sa* in a Neo-Babylonian fragment in contrast to *ša-* in the southern Babylonian inscriptions from Sūḫu (Zadok 2013, 317; Dietrich 2003, 4) may suggest that the initial sibilant was not identical to either sound and was therefore approximated in different ways depending on the scribe.

[lú]*ta-am-da-a-a*: Ran Zadok has connected this name with the famous Arabian tribe Thamūd (Zadok 2013, 317), attested already in Neo-Assyrian records. A close linguistic match may be found in the Jordanian toponym *wādī ṭamad*, in the area of Madaba. The form *ṭmdn* is attested once in Safaitic (KRS 2271) and would correspond to the anthroponym [I]*tam-da-nu*, which Zadok suspects is linguistically related to the tribal name (Zadok 2013, 317). The Arabic meaning of the root *ṭmd* is 'to dig a well or channel', and is comparable to the meaning of *nbṭ*, which later gives rise to the ethnonym *nbṭ* 'Nabataean'.

Anthroponyms

One-Word Names with Wawation

[I]*gu-da-du-u* (Gudādû): This name appears to be formed with the *qutāl* noun pattern, which is quite common in the Arabic onomasticon (Zadok 2013, 318; 2004, 205). It may be compared to Safaitic *gdd* or

Nabataean *gdw* (Negev 1991, 18), although the latter appears to belong to a different noun pattern. The basic sense of this root is 'to cut', but also gives rise to words meaning 'lot' and 'fate'.

^I*kal-li-lu-ú* (Kallilû): Zadok (2013, 318) connects it with Aramaic *klyl²* and Arabic *iklīl* 'crown'. A similar name is attested in Safaitic as *kll*, but the vocalisation is unclear. G. Lankester Harding suggests a connection with Arabic *kālilun* 'weary' (Harding 1971, 504). *Kll* may be a divine name, if it is to be connected with the South Arabian *ʿbdkllm* 'worshipper of *kll*' (Harding 1971, 400) and the Arabic theophoric name *ʿAbd-kulāl*, preserved in Islamic-period sources.

^I*bal-taₛ-mu-²* (Baltam(mu); Zadok (2013, 319)): The root *bśm* is common to Arabic and Northwest Semitic, but *wawation* suggests that this name has an Arabic source. The name *bśm* is attested at Taymā², and Palmyra *bsm* (Stark 1971, 11). The word seems ultimately to come from a Northwest Semitic source meaning 'spice', 'perfume', Aramaic *besmā*.

^I*s/šam-šu-²* (Šamšu; Zadok 2003, 532): This name is derived from the common Semitic word for 'sun'. The name *śms* is common in Safaitic (Harding 1971, 258), and may be a shortened form of the theophoric name *ʿAbd-śams* 'worshipper of Shams', which is common in the Arabic onomasticon until the rise of Islam (Caskell 1966, 131), of which this name could be a hypocoristic form.

^I*šab-pu-ú* (Šabbû): Zadok connects this name with the Arabic root *šbb* 'to cut' (Zadok 2013, 308), but it is also possible to see in it the sense of 'youth'. The name is common in Ancient North Arabian, attested as *śb* in Safaitic and Hismaic, and a possible diminutive form in Dadanitic, *śbb* (Harding 1971, 337). The name *šby* is attested in Nabataean (Negev 1991, 61), as well as in Palmyrene (Stark 1971, 50), perhaps with a hypocoristic *y*.

^I*zu-uḫ-ru-²* (Zuḫru): This *wawated* name is given in Aramaic transcription as *z²r²*, which Zadok interprets as the replacement of *wawation* with an Aramaic hypocoristic ending *²* (Zadok 2013, 318). The Aramaic spelling may further suggest that its original vocalisation was *zuġru* 'small'. This spelling does not find any parallels in the Ancient North Arabian onomasticon, but note that the root for 'small' is in fact *zġr* in many modern Arabic vernaculars. One can rule out late Aramaic influence as the phoneme *ġayn* is preserved; thus, it seems to be a native Arabic biform of the root.

^I*ia-²-lu-ulú* (Yālû): Zadok (2013, 318) identifies this as a form of the name *w²lw*, which is widely attested in the Ancient North Arabian

onomasticon (Harding 1971, 645). This connection posits a change of *w > y*, which is typical of the Northwest Semitic languages and in the local vernacular of Taymāʔ (Kootstra 2016, 84–5), and may suggest that the name was drawn from that area. On the other hand, one might see in this name a prefix-conjugated verb, *yaʕlu* 'to go up'. The personal name *yʕly*, which reflects a confusion of the *w* and *y* in the root *ʕlw*, is common in Ancient North Arabian (Harding 1971, 677) and Nabataean (Negev 1991, 34). A similar confusion of roots is encountered in the Arabian name *ia-u-ta-ʔ*, attested in Neo-Assyrian sources (Ephʿal 1974, 111), which appears to correspond with Safaitic *ytʕ*, attested in Greek transcription as ιαιθεου (Winnett and Harding 1978 no. 3562 and Greek 2).

One-Word Names Derived from Verbs

ᴵ*ia-a-šu-pi*: Zadok (2013, 319) connects this name with Arabic Yasūf, from *swf* 'to endure'. While such a name is not attested in the Ancient North Arabian onomasticon, the name *yśf* is found once in Safaitic (CEDSQM 15) and attested in Sabaic and Qatabanic (DASI, s.v.). The name would appear to be a prefix-conjugated form of the root *śwf* 'to adorn'. The representation of Arabian *s²*, a lateral sibilant, with *šu* rather than *lt*, as in *baltam* (see 'One-Word Names with *Wawation*'), may suggest inconsistency in the representation of this foreign sound, similar to the representation of Sabaic *s¹* in the name *sabaʔ*.

One-Word Names With the *ān* Termination

The final *-ān* termination appears to be a hypocoristic suffix commonly used in Arabic names. Names of this sort do not take *wawation* in Nabataean and the same rule appears to be observed in cuneiform sources.

ᴵ*ḫa-ir-a-nu* (Ḫairān): Zadok (2013, 319) takes this as an Arabian name, contra Michael P. Streck (1999, 289). The name is attested in Ancient North Arabian as *ḫrn* (Harding 1971, 220) and *ḫyrw* in Nabataean (Negev 1991, 29). The name also appears in Greek transcriptions from the Roman period in southern Syria, Χαιρανης (PAES III.a 793.9), Χαιρανο (PAES III.a 793).

ᴵ*a-tu-bal ma-nu* (Zadok 2013, 319): This name likely renders Arabic *ʕ-t-b* 'to scold, reproach', which gives rise to the name *ʕtb* in Hismaic and Dadanitic (Harding 1971, 404). The name, in its diminutive form,

is that of the large tribal confederacy ʿutaybah, pl. ʿutbān, in Saudi Arabia today. The present vocalisation appears to combine the hypocoristic -ān with a passive participial form ʿatūb, thus ʿatūbān.

Theophoric Names

The commonest theophoric element in Arabian names in pre-Islamic times is ʾil 'god'; this holds true in both South Arabian and in the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions. Other elements like ʾab 'father', ʾaḫ 'brother' are attested as well. Arabian names in Neo-Babylonian sources reflect these trends.

[I]*ad-bi-i-lu* (Adbi-il; Zadok 2013, 319): A theophoric name with ʾil as a divine name. Such names are common in Ancient North Arabian and Ancient South Arabian. The name ʾdbʾl is attested in Safaitic and Hismaic (Harding 1971, 31). The element ʾdb is also attested independently (Harding 1971, 31). The name would seem to mean 'Guest of ʾil'.

[I]*abi-ḫa-zu-mu* (Abī-ḫazumu): Zadok (2013, 319) takes this as 'My father is firm', connecting it to Arabic ḫazuma, which is attested as a one-word name in Ancient North Arabian and Arabic (Harding 1971, 187).

[I]*da-ḫi-ri-ʾil* (Daḫīr-il): Zadok (2013, 319) connects the first element with Arabic daḫīrah 'treasure'. Dḫr and dḫrt are attested in Safaitic and Hismaic but never as a component of a theophoric name (Harding 1971, 236). The basic sense of this root is 'to be contemptible, despicable'.

Further Reading

For an overview of Arabs in cuneiform sources, see Israel Ephʿal (1984) and Jan Retsö (2003). On Arabs in Babylonia during the eighth century BCE, see Israel Ephʿal (1974). The works of Ran Zadok on the Arabian onomasticon in cuneiform sources are indispensable; for the latest summary, see Zadok (2013) and the bibliography there. See Benjamin Sass (1991) on Arabian inscriptions in Babylonia.

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