Ancient Arabia:
A brief history and time-line

Sections 1 and 2 by Michael Macdonald
Section 3 by Norbert Nebes (translated by Konstantin Klein)
Sections 4 and 5 by Michael Macdonald (with help from Greg Fisher) and Norbert Nebes (translated by Konstantin Klein).

1. Multiple Arabias

Ancient sources, in particularly the Assyrian Annals and the Greek and Roman historians and geographers, defined ‘Arabia’ as anywhere inhabited by peoples called ‘Arabs’. They applied this term to populations with very different ways-of-life in a wide variety of areas, and it seems likely that only a combination of a recognizably common language and certain common cultural traits could have defined them all as belonging to the same group. ¹

From the 8th century BC, the Assyrians and Babylonians recorded Arabs living (from east to west) in eastern Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Iran, settled in large numbers in Babylonia, in the Syrian Jazīra (between the Tigris and Euphrates), on the slopes of the Anti–Lebanon mountains (between modern Lebanon and Syria), in north and north-west Arabia, and in Sinai. By the 6th century, the Achaemenid Persian empire recognized an Arab enclave in Gaza and its hinterland, and a century later Herodotus regarded ‘Arabia’ as being most of eastern Egypt, between the Nile and the Red Sea. Xenophon (c. 430–c. 354 BC) found ‘Arabias’ in northern Syria and northern and central Mesopotamia, while Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) encountered Arabs in the Lebanon and Anti–Lebanon mountains, Gaza, Sinai, the eastern Nile Delta, and eastern Egypt, as well as at the head of the Persian Gulf, and even in central Iran. ² His explorers also identified and defined the ‘Arabian’ Peninsula for the first time, and, by the Roman period, there were ‘Arabias’ in eastern Egypt and the delta, Sinai, southern Palestine (the Negev), the Beqa‘ Valley of Lebanon and the Anti–Lebanon, the whole of modern Jordan, southern, central and northern Syria, northern, central, and southern Mesopotamia, as well as the Peninsula. This does not mean that the total populations of any of these areas were considered to be ‘Arabs’, but that there were Arab populations in them of sufficiently significant size and importance to be recognized by outsiders. Thus, for instance, while in the early

² For details see Macdonald, Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic [see note 1], and references there.
centuries AD there were quite considerable Arab communities in Southern Arabia (modern Yemen), and Graeco–Roman geographers mistakenly called it *Arabia Felix*, the majority indigenous populations in the kingdoms of that region did not regard themselves as Arabs.

The ways-of-life of these populations varied considerably. In many places they were sedentary farmers, in others they had self-governing cities, in others they formed merchant colonies within cities, in yet others they had extensive kingdoms (e.g. the Nabataeans and those in northern Mesopotamia), while others were nomads. Thus, from the early 1st millennium BC when we first hear of ‘Arabs’, they occupied increasingly large areas throughout the Fertile Crescent. As yet, we have no evidence of where they originated. The idea that it was necessarily from the Peninsula is an anachronistic misunderstanding, since the Peninsula only came to be called ‘Arabia’ *par excellence* from the late Hellenistic and Roman periods onwards. We do not know what, if anything, it was called by its *inhabitants* at that time and earlier.

In 64 BC Pompey made Syria into a Roman Province. However, the Nabataean kingdom which stretched from southern Syria to north-west Arabia and into southern Palestine, remained independent until AD 106 when it too was annexed by Rome and was renamed *Provincia Arabia*. After this, all the inhabitants of this Province were called ‘Arabs’ by the Romans and it gradually became necessary to find another name for the nomads who had previously been called ‘Arabs’ but were not subjects of the province. For these, the term ‘Saracen’ (probably derived from a North Arabian word meaning ‘those who migrate to the inner desert’) ³ was slowly adopted. However, the term ‘Arab’ continued to be used of *settled* Arabs in regions such as the Jazīra and northern Mesopotamia. Thus, in AD 195, Septimius Severus fought ‘Arabs’ in northern Mesopotamia and so assumed the honorific title *Arabicus*. Eventually, however, the term ‘Saracen’ was extended to all those who had previously been called ‘Arabs’, regardless of whether they were settled or nomadic. In the period after AD 106, it is therefore important to distinguish between events in the Province of Arabia, those in the Arabian Peninsula, and those affecting Arabs in other places.

**2. The north, west, centre, and east of the Arabian Peninsula:**

What we call the ‘Arabian Peninsula’ has been inhabited since Palaeolithic times. Recent discoveries⁴ have shown that early hominids made their way out of Africa across the bed of the Red Sea (which was almost dry at that time) and through the Arabian Peninsula into Asia, as well as via the Levant into Europe. Successive climate changes

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³ Link to [Macdonald, On Saracens, the Rawwāfah Inscription and the Roman Army](I think you have the pdf) ⁴ See [Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies](Link to www.arabianseminar.org.uk/proceedings.html) 38, 2008, pp. 1–69
meant that over tens of thousands of years, prehistoric Man survived by adopting different ways of life, as witnessed for instance by rock-drawings of cattle in what are now desert areas and of the hunting of dromedaries in the days before the animal was domesticated.

The landmass of the Peninsula slopes gently eastward from a mountain chain along the western (Red Sea) coast to the Persian Gulf. In the south–west and south–east there are extensive mountainous areas which benefit from the twice–yearly monsoon rains, which, when conserved, permit permanent irrigated agriculture. This was the basis of the prosperity of ancient Yemen and also permitted the cultivation of the frankincense tree (*Boswellia sacra*) primarily in Dhofar (in modern Oman). In the centre, north and south–east of the Peninsula, there are scattered areas where irrigated agricultural is possible (e.g. in parts of Najd, ‘Asīr, the Wādī al–Dawāsir, and Oman), and there are numerous oases across the Peninsula, some of them extremely large (e.g. al–Hasa [= Wāḥat al–Aḥsā‘], Ḥā‘il, Dūma [mediaeval Dūmat al–Jandal, modern al–Jawf], Tabūk, ‘Ayym’, Dadan [Biblical Dedân, modern al–‘Ulā], and Yathrib [= al–Madīna]) where permanent settled populations have for millennia practiced agriculture, horticulture and the cultivation of huge groves of date–palms, and at different periods have developed urban societies and even kingdoms.

From the 4th millennium BC onwards, the Peninsula lay between the two great powers of the ancient Near East: Egypt on the west and Mesopotamia (Assyria and Babylonia), and later Iran, to the north–east. Most of our knowledge of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages in Arabia comes from eastern Arabia5, because it is here that it has been possible to undertake archaeological work for longest. Eastern Arabia lay between the civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley and was on the trade–routes between the two. Its many prehistoric societies named after the sites where they were first identified (Ḥafīt, Hīlī, Umm an–Nār, etc.) have left large monumental tombs with communal burials and distinctive repertoires of artefacts. From the 4th millennium BC onwards, first the eastern coast of what is now Saudi Arabia and then the islands of Bahrain were known to the Sumerians and then the Babylonians as ‘Dilmun’. The earliest sources refer to it as a staging post for timber (and later, for metals) brought from far–off lands for use in Mesopotamia. In Sumerian mythology, it was regarded as a sort of earthly Paradise because of its abundance of fresh water. Between 2400 and 1700 BC over 170,000 large burial tumuli were constructed in the north of the island. In the Oman Peninsula, known as *Magan* in cuneiform documents, copper was mined, smelted and exported to Mesopotamia from the third millennium BC onwards.

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In Oman, a sophisticated irrigation system called the *falaj* was developed in the Iron Age and the technology was later exported to Iran, where these tunnels were known as ‘*qanāt*’ [= *qanāh*]. The *falaj* brought water from springs via underground tunnels to the fields and settlements, making possible extensive agriculture in areas with little seasonal rainfall.

The domestication of the dromedary which seems to have taken place in south-east Arabia around 1200–1100 BC, provided sources of rich milk products as well as beasts of burden and means of transport for settled people and for nomads.

In the last centuries BC and the early centuries AD a number of states flourished on the east coast of the Peninsula, among which the great trading city of Gerrha (exact site unidentified) was the most famous. Gerrha dominated the trade between the Indian Ocean, Mesopotamia, Yemen, and — via the Nabataeans — the Mediterranean. Several of these states minted their own coins and these show that some were ruled by women.

In the north and centre of the Peninsula, sedentary life was mainly concentrated in large oases. While agriculture and the cultivation of the date palm formed the basis of their economies, by the second millennium and possibly even earlier, some (e.g. Taymā’) had developed into urban centres, probably as a result of their positions on the trade routes. At Qurayya, in the north-west, pottery has been found which seems to link it with the copper–mining site of Timna in the Wādī ‘Araba (the southern extension of the Dead Sea Valley) which was controlled by the Egyptians in the 2nd millennium BC. By the first millennium BC, the oases in the north and north-west of the Peninsula had become pivotal in the trade in frankincense and spices brought overland from Southern Arabia to Egypt, the Mediterranean (at Gaza), the Levant, Syria, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia. Already in the 8th century BC, a caravan of the people of Taymā’ (in North Arabia) and

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Saba’ (in South Arabia) was ambushed by the Assyrian governor of Suḥu on the Euphrates.  

The rulers of Assyria and Babylonia, anxious to control the northern end of this trade, launched repeated attacks against the populations (both settled and nomadic) of North Arabia, many of whom were ruled by priestess–queens based in the oasis of Dūma (mediaeval Dumat al–Jandal, modern al–Jawf). So important was this trade that by the mid–6th century BC, Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon (555–539 BC), chose to reside in Taymāʾ for the major part of his reign (probably 552–543 BC), having already conquered five other major oases on the trade route from the south, including Dadan (Biblical Dedân) and Yathrib (modern al–Madina). In Dadan, which was the site of two successive kingdoms (Dadan and Liḥyān), Minaean merchants from South Arabia, who were the major dealers in frankincense, founded a trading station. By the first century AD, the Nabataeans — nomadic Arabs who had settled in southern Jordan in the 3rd century BC and had taken control of the northern end of the trade route — ruled the whole of the north–west of the Peninsula and had established a city, Hegrā (mediaeval al–Ḥijr, modern Madāʾin Šāliḥ) some 20 km north of Dadan.

In the centre of the Peninsula, on the north–west edge of the ‘Empty Quarter’, another oasis site called Qaryat Dhāt Kahl (modern Qaryat al–Faw) flourished between the 2nd century BC and the 5th century AD. It was the capital of the Arab tribes of Kinda, Madḥḥi and Qaḥṭān. Excavations there have revealed an extraordinarily rich and luxurious way of life, with wall–paintings, exquisite glass, bronze and stone statuary, decorative textiles, and large numbers of inscriptions. Luxury goods were imported from the Mediterranean world, Egypt, the Levant, Mesopotamia, India, South Arabia and other places. Its prosperity was based on its strategic location on the major trade route from Southern Arabia to the Persian Gulf. Although it was within the cultural orbit of

10 See Macdonald, M.C.A. Trade Routes and Trade Goods at the Northern End of the “Incense Road” in the First Millennium B.C. No. IX in M.C.A. Macdonald, Literacy and Identity in Pre–Islamic Arabia. (Variorum Collected Studies, 906). Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, and references there.


13 See Al–Ansary, A.T., Qaryat al–Faw. A Portrait of Pre–Islamic Civilisation in Saudi Arabia. London: Croom Helm, 1982; and
the Minaeans and Sabaeans, it developed an independent artistic style and periodically asserted its political independence.

Besides these settled cultures, there were nomadic tribes in most parts of the Peninsula from at least the 4th millennium onwards. These tribes would have lived in a symbiotic relationship with the inhabitants of the oases since each population could provide important goods needed by the other: the nomads provided the sedentaries with meat, animal transport, leather, wool and milk-products, and in return the oasis dwellers could provide, vegetables, flour, dates, wood and metal-products. Both communities were involved in, and profited from, the south–north overland trade and therefore had a vested interest in the preservation of peace.

When the Nabataeans settled in southern Jordan in the 3rd century BC, they made their capital at Regem, called by the Greeks Petra. Even as nomads, they had been renowned for their expertise in constructing hidden cisterns in the desert to provide water throughout the year, and when they settled they became great hydrological engineers and their conservation of the seasonal rainfall enabled them to put large areas under irrigated cultivation. The well–ordered urban society of Petra aroused the admiration of the Greek philosopher Athenodorus, who lived there for some years. The Nabataeans dominated the northern end of the incense trade route from Southern Arabia to the Mediterranean, and, as mentioned above, worked with the merchants from the eastern Arabian city of Gerrha in bringing spices and other luxury goods from India and beyond to the markets of the Mediterranean world. From southern Jordan they expanded their kingdom until by the end of the 1st century BC it stretched from southern Syria to north–west Arabia and included Sinai and the Negev. In the mid 1st century AD, the last Nabataean king, Rabbel II, moved his capital from Petra to Boṣrā in southern Syria and when, on his death in AD 106, the Romans annexed the kingdom and named it Provincia Arabia, they retained Boṣrā as the capital. The new era of the Province was known both as the era of Boṣrā and of the Province, and continued to be used in official documents until the Islamic conquests (mid 7th century AD), and by Christians until much later.

The Roman and Byzantine empires ruled the Near East for over 600 years (from 64 BC to the Islamic conquests in AD 635–640), and throughout this period their policy was dominated by the conflict with Persia/Iran. The fluctuating border between these two superpowers ran through Armenia (in what is now eastern Turkey) and the Jazīra. Parts of this region consisted of rich agricultural land and parts were desert, and there were cities on both sides of both rivers. There was one or more settled Arab kingdoms in the northern Jazīra, and Arab communities, both settled and nomadic, further south. These were constantly caught up in the conflict between Rome and Persia.

In AD 224, the Sasanian dynasty overthrew the Parthians and took power in Persia, which from now on was called Iran by its rulers. From
the mid 4th century onwards the Sasanians employed the Arab Nasrid (sometimes called ‘Lakhmid’) kingdom, with its capital at al-Ḥīra (in what is now south-western Iraq) to raid Byzantine territory; and, by the end of the 5th century, the Arab Jafnids (of the tribal confederation of Ghassān) had settled in southern Syria and the Province of Arabia, and were being used in the same way by the Byzantine side. However, the relationship between the Jafnids and the Byzantine state was constantly disturbed by theological problems because the Jafnids held firmly to Miaphysite Christianity and resisted all attempts by the state to impose the Chalcedonian Christology upon them. Religion was much less of a problem between the Zoroastrian Iranian state, which had little missionary zeal, and the Nasrids who mostly remained pagan, apart from the last king who adopted Nestorian Christianity.

The constant conflicts between the Byzantine and Iranian states so debilitated both sides that they were unable to resist the armies of the nascent Islamic state in the 4th decade of the 7th century. The Byzantines were unable to retain any of their eastern provinces south of Anatolia and, in a remarkably short period, the Islamic armies had also conquered the Iranian empire.

3. Ancient South Arabia

Unlike the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, south-west Arabia appears to have been a coherent cultural sphere, which — despite many outside influences and drastic internal changes — preserved its own cultural, political, and linguistic individuality from its historical beginnings until late antiquity. By the early first millennium BC, highly developed communities had appeared in the arid deltas at the eastern fringes of the Yemeni central plateau. They used writing and had monumental architecture, and their economy was based on agriculture watered by the monsoons with at least two harvests per year. The most important among these communities were Sabaʾ, Maʾin, Qataban and Ḫaḍramawt. Their wealth — of which Graeco-Roman authors speak when referring to Arabia Eudaimōn or Arabia Felix — was based on the trade in frankincense and other spices, and on control of large stretches of the trade route to the markets in the north.

Our first detailed insight from within South Arabia itself into its political landscape in the 1st millennium BC is found in the lengthy Res Gestae (or ‘Deeds’) of the Sabæan rulers Yithaʾamar Watar and Karibʾil Watar. These are the earliest reliably datable historical records from South Arabia, and indeed from the Arabian Peninsula in general. These huge inscriptions were set up around 715 and 685 BC.


respectively, in the sanctuary of the principal Sabaean deity, ‘Almaqah, at Ṣīrwāḥ, close to the Sabaean metropolis of Mārib. They tell of the Sabaean’s defeat of their southern and northern neighbours and the consequent establishment of their hegemony in South Arabia.

The epigraphic evidence provides only limited information on the structure and organization of societies in ancient South Arabia. The most detailed data concern the situation in the Sabaean heartland around Mārib and Ṣīrwāḥ. At the head of society was the so-called mukarrīb who performed the role of mediator between the principal Sabaean god, ‘Almaqah, and the people of Saba’. He was responsible for the exercise of ritual duties such as the performance of the sacred marriage and the organization of ritual banquets for ‘Athtar, the only deity venerated by all South Arabian peoples. He was in charge of the performance of ritual processions in the large temple complexes, of certain sacrifices, and of the ritual hunt. The title mukarrīb (“unifier”) probably alludes to the central political task of the Sabaean ruler, namely uniting the South Arabian cities and tribes under Sabaean sovereignty through a far-reaching system of alliances. With the decline of Sabaean power in the 4th century BC, the title mukarrīb passed to other kingdoms and was replaced in Sabaʾ by the term “king” (mlk).

When, in the 4th century BC, Sabaʾ eventually relinquished its hegemony, Qataḥan managed to extend its territory to the south–west as far as Bab al–Mandab (the straits where the Red Sea meets the Indian Ocean). Minaean merchants, who established a trading colony with its own administrative structures in Dadan (modern al–ʿUlā, in north–west Saudi Arabia), are also found in Egypt, the Levant, at Ctesiphon on the river Tigris in Mesopotamia, and even on the Greek island of Delos.

In 25 BC, the Prefect of the Roman Province of Egypt, Aelius Gallus, set out with an army of 10,000 soldiers towards South Arabia. According to the Greek geographer Strabo (64/63 BC–AD 25), 17 when the Roman army reached the Sabaean metropolis of Mārib they besieged it for six days but could not take it. Although we lack corresponding sources from the South Arabian side, this campaign may be connected with the final disappearance of the Minaeans, with the result that the overland trade in frankincense was taken over by the Nabataeans. Nabataean merchants are known to have been in South Arabia from a Sabaic–Nabataean bilingual inscription found at Ṣīrwāḥ. 18

Later, due to the increasing importance of the maritime trade with India, which had already been stimulated by the Roman occupation of Egypt, the balance of power shifted in South Arabia. The few natural harbours and their access points became especially important. By this

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period, or even earlier, Ḥadramī colonizers had established the port of Samārum (also known as 'Sumhuram', modern Khor Rori) on the coast of Dhofar close to the region where frankincense was produced, while the harbour of Qani’ west of modern al–Mukallā on the Yemeni coast, secured Ḥadramī access to maritime trade after the turn of the era.

From the 1st century AD onwards, the people of Ḥimyar in the southern highlands began to break away from Qataban and eventually emerged as a considerable power in South Arabian politics. Around the turn of the era, possibly as a result of Aelius Gallus’ campaign, a coalition was formed between Sabaʾ and Himyar, and from this point onwards their rulers called themselves ‘kings of Sabaʾ and Dhū Raidān’, the latter referring to the royal place in the Himyarite capital, Zafār. This coalition was ended by the rise of tribes in the highlands of northern Yemen, which replaced the royal dynasty of Sabaʾ in Mārib during the 2nd century AD.

The 2nd and 3rd centuries AD are characterized by a series of wars between a number of different protagonists. After Qataban had been absorbed by Ḥadramawt, a final, ephemeral, Sabaean hegemony was created through a policy of large-scale expansion by the Sabaean king Shaʾirum Awtar. His campaigns led him northwards to Qaryat al–Faʾw (see above). In the east of Yemen, he destroyed Shabwa, the capital of the Ḥadramī kingdom, and Qāniʾ, its port for trade with India. In the west he marched against the Abyssinians settled on the Red Sea coast of Yemen. In Saḥā, he built the castle of Ghumdān, the splendour of which, even in the tenth century, impressed the Yemeni historian and geographer al–Hamdānī. Large numbers of inscriptions from the 3rd century AD, by both Sabaeans and Himyarites, mention the fierce wars conducted — with varying outcomes — by the Sabean king Ilsharab Yaḥḍib and his Himyarite opponents Shammar Yuḥaḥmīd and Karibʾīl Ayfaʾ. Although there was no one decisive battle, towards the end of the 3rd century the Himyarites eventually emerged victorious. By the beginning of the 4th century, Yemen was united under the Himyarite king Shammar Yuḥar’ish. The Himyarites composed their

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inscriptions in a southern Sabaic dialect, using the same script as their predecessors. 21

Around the middle of the 4th century AD, the first evidence of monotheism begins to appear in the Ancient South Arabian inscriptions. The deity invoked is "(god) the Lord of Heaven (and of the earth)," later also called Rahmānān, "the merciful". 22 This was an epithet designating the Jewish God, as the phraseology in several religious inscriptions from the following period show. The Himyarite dynasty’s conversion to Judaism was at least in part a reaction to the increasing Byzantine influence in this region, and in particular the conversion to Christianity of the Abyssinian king ‘Ezānā IV in Aksum. This adoption of different forms of monotheism gave an additional religio-political element to the conflict between the two powers on either side of the Bab al-Mandab: Himyar and Abyssinia.

The epigraphic evidence, however, does not reveal whether there was a continuous conflict from this time on, or a particular aggravation of the situation during the 5th century. After several campaigns, Ḥimyar under its king Abikarib As’ad managed to extend its sphere of influence into central Arabia, and to maintain its hold through its Arab proxies the kings of Kinda and the Bedouin confederation of Ma’add.

In the first quarter of the 6th century AD, a major conflict erupted between Ḥimyar and the Abyssinians. We are fortunate to have information about this not only from Sabaic and Ethiopic inscriptions, but also from Syriac and Greek literary sources. Immediately before this, the Himyarite dynasty appears to have been pursuing a pro-Byzantine (and thus pro-Abyssinian) policy. This would explain the large numbers of Christian communities on the western coastal plain of Yemen, in the capital Zafār, in Ḥadramawt, and in Najrān in the north, against which (and against their Abyssinian protectors) the Himyarite king Yūsuf Ash’ar (known in later Arab sources as Dhū Nuwas) took action at the beginning of the 520s. These military actions culminated in the siege and surrender of Najrān and the massacre of all the Christian inhabitants. 23 Aided by the Byzantines,


22 The connection of Rahmanān with deity Ṣm found in Palmyrene inscriptions and al-Raḥmān, the epithet of Allāḥ, in the Qur’ān, is unclear.

the Abyssinian counterattack, led by the Abyssinian Negus (king) Ella-Åṣbeḥa in person, conquered South Arabia, putting an end to Himyarite rule. An Abyssinian, Abreha, established himself in the following years as the Christian ruler of South Arabia, but distanced himself to a considerable extent from the kings in Aksum. His reign, was marked by large building projects such as the last overhaul of the Mārib dam and the erection of a cathedral in the new capital, Ṣān‘ā’. Abyssinian rule in South Arabia eventually ended in the 570s when the country was conquered by the Sasanians. It remained an Iranian province until AD 628 when its governor converted to Islam and declared his allegiance to the nascent Islamic state in al-Madina.

4. Literacy in ancient Arabia

The art of writing was practised widely within the western–two thirds of the Peninsula. Arabia had its own family of alphabets (the South Semitic script family), descended from the Proto–alphabet of the second millennium, but which developed in parallel to the Phoenico–Aramaic alphabets of the Levant. Writing was used extensively not only by oasis–dwellers and in the states of South Arabia, but also, from the mid 1st millennium BC, by the nomads, who have left scores of thousands of graffiti on the desert rocks from southern Syria to the borders of Yemen. The South Semitic script family is mentioned as ta–i–ma–ni–ti (i.e. the script of Taymā’) already in an inscription of the 8th century BC at Carchemish in what is now southern Turkey. In north–west and central Arabia, the languages of the inscriptions were Ancient North Arabian, a group of dialects related to Arabic, although Arabic itself appears to have remained a largely unwritten language until the 5th century AD. Curiously, in eastern Arabia we have very few inscriptions, and these are in Akkadian, Aramaic, Greek, and South Arabian, with a handful (Hasaitic) in what may be an Ancient North Arabian dialect expressed in the Sabaic script.

The Ancient South Arabian languages attested in inscriptions from the geographical area which is now Yemen, were Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, and Hadramitic. These stand apart linguistically from the languages known from the rest of the Peninsula. With more than 5,000


inscriptions spread over 1,600 years (from the late 10th century BC to the 6th century AD), Sabaic is the best attested and the longest documented language, not only of South Arabia but of the entire Arabian Peninsula. The documents, which are usually engraved on prepared stone surfaces, cover a wide range of topics and are written in an alphabet of 29 letters, the elegant geometrical forms of which were already fully developed by the 8th and 7th centuries BC. A “minuscule” version of the script, which has been known to scholarship since the 1970s, was incised on palm-leaf stalks and wooden sticks and used for day-to-day documents. The earliest of these known so far has been dated by 14C to between 1055 and 901 BC.  

Further reading

For histories of north and central Arabia see:


For eastern Arabia, see


For south Arabia, see


5. Time-line

10th century BC

the earliest securely dated writing in an indigenous script in Arabia: a document carved on a stick in the South Arabian script, dated by 14C to between 1055 and 901 BC.

853 BC

First reference to an ‘Arab’. The annals of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC) record that ‘Gindibu the Arab’ brought 1000 camels to the alliance of kings against Assyria at the battle of Qarqar (central Syria).

Late 9th/early 8th century BC

Yariris, the regent of the city of Carchemish (now southern Turkey), boasts that he can read the script of Taymāʾ (probably meaning alphabets of the South Semitic script family).

8th century BC

The Neo-Assyrian governor of Suhu, on the west bank of the Euphrates, attacks a caravan of ‘the people of Taymāʾ and Sabāʾ.’

738 BC

Zabibe ‘Queen of the Arabs’, along with many kings of states in the Levant, Syria and southern Anatolia, sends tribute to the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BC).

734–716 BC

The reign of Samsi ‘Queen of the Arabs’, of the tribe of Qēdār, based at the oasis of Dūma.

734 BC

Samsi swears allegiance to Tiglath-Pileser III.

733 BC

Samsi, together with the inhabitants of the oasis of Taymāʾ, plus various Arab tribes, and possibly with the assistance of Sabaʾ, rebels against Tiglath-Pileser III, but is defeated. The Assyrians claim that 9400 of her soldiers were killed and over 1000 taken captive along with 30,000 camels, 20,000 sheep and
5000 measures of all sorts of spices. Samsi is allowed to remain queen, but an Assyrian official is placed over her.

**732–705 BC**

Assyrian officials in Syria write to the king at Kalhu (modern Nimrud) about relations with Arabs in their provinces.

**716 BC**

Sargon II (720–705 BC) settles Arab tribes from North Arabia in Samaria.

**c. 716 BC**

Samsi, together with ‘Ita’amara the Sabaean’ and the Pharaoh of Egypt, sends gifts to Sargon II.

**703 BC**

Arabs living in walled towns and in villages in western Babylonia support Merodach-baladan II, king of Babylon (722–710, and 702 BC), against the Assyrians, but are defeated and Basqanu, brother of lati’e, queen of the Arabs, is captured. Ancient North Arabian inscriptions (in the South Semitic script) are written in Babylonian cities probably at this period.

**From the 7th century BC**

Sabaean colonists begin to settle in region of Axum, Ethiopia.

**691–689 BC**

Te’elḥunu, queen of the Arabs based at Adumatu (Dūma) and Haza’el, king of Qēdār, are defeated by Sennacherib, king of Assyria (705–681 BC). Dūma is captured and Te’elḥunu is carried off to Assyria, along with the images of the gods of the Arabs. Tabūa, an Arab girl (possibly daughter of Te’elḥunu) is also carried off but is brought up at the court of Senacherib. Haza’el surrenders to Senacherib and a heavy tribute is imposed upon him.

**685 BC**

Karibīlū (Karib’il Watar bin Dhamar‘ali), king of Saba’, sends a gift (nāmurtu) to Senacherib who places it in the foundation of the Bīt Akitu (New Year festival) temple.

**685 BC**

The great inscription of Karib’il Watar in the temple to ‘Almaqah at Śirwāḥ records his victory over the king of Awsān and his allies as well as the destruction of his palace and capital in Wādi Markha. Qataban and Ḥaḍramawt form an alliance with Saba’. The king of Nashshān in the Yemeni Jawf is
defeated. Najrān (north of Yemen and a focal point on the frankincense trade-routes) is conquered. Saba’ becomes the dominant power in South Arabia. The upper storey of the Salḥīn palace in Mārib is built.

681–676 BC

Esarhaddon king of Assyria (680–669 BC) restores the images of the gods to Dūma and makes Tabūa queen of the Arabs, in place of Te’elhunu. He confirms Haza’el as king of Qēdār, imposing an extra tribute upon him. Haza’el dies, and Esarhaddon confirms the succession of Haza’el’s son, lauta’, in return for a heavy extra annual tribute of 10 minas of gold, 1000 choice jewels, 50 camels and 1000 bags of spices.

676–673 BC

Esarhaddon suppresses a rebellion against lauta’.

673–669 BC

lauta’ rebels against Esarhaddon but is defeated and the images of the gods are again taken from Dūma.

671 BC

Arab tribes in Sinai help Esarhaddon's troops to cross Sinai and to invade Egypt.

668 BC

The Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (688–631 BC) returns the images of the gods to lauta’ king of Qēdār.

Before 652 BC

lauta’ and his wife Adiya, ‘queen of the Arabs’, attack Assyria's vassal states in Transjordan. They are defeated and Adiya is captured. lauta’ takes refuge with Natnū king of the Nabaioth (south of Taymā’) but eventually gives himself up to the Assyrians. Ashurbanipal makes Abiyata’ son of Te’ri king of Qēdār in place of lauta’.

651–648 BC

Abiyata’ supports Shamash–shum–ukin king of Babylon (667–648 BC) against Ashurbanipal, who, however, defeats them in Syria.

After 646 BC

Ashurbanipal attacks and defeats the Arab tribes of Qēdār and Nabaioth in central Syria.

Mid–7th century BC

The Sabaean Mukarrib, Yada’il Dharih, builds a wall around the principal sanctuary of ’Almaqah, the god of the Sabaean kingdom, at Mārib, and the temple of ’Almaqah at Širwāḥ.
First Greek references (in Sappho) to frankincense, using a word of Semitic origin.

The first reference to ‘Arabs’ in South Arabia occurs in a Minaic inscription, though it is unclear from the context whether it is the name of a people or a word for ‘nomads’.

Under Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 BC), the Babylonian army plunders Arab nomads in Syria.

Nabonidus, last king of Babylon (555–539 BC) conquers 6 important oases in north-west Arabia, including Taymāʾ and Dadan whose kings he kills. He sets up his residence in Taymāʾ for 10 years (probably 552–543 BC).

The records of an unnamed Sabean muckarrib, probably Yithaʾamar Bayyin son of Sumuhuʾalī Yanūf, mention a war against Qataban, a campaign against the Minaeans and their kingdom of Maʾīn, as well as the siege of Yathill in the north of the Yemeni Jawf, the heartland of the Minaeans. Towers and gates were added to the city wall of Mārib. The northern and southern sluices of the great dam at Mārib were built. The rise of Qataban and Maʾīn.

A king of ‘Arabia’ (in northern Mesopotamia) brings 100 chariots, 10,000 horsemen and a large number of infantry armed with slings to join the kings of Greater Phrygia, and Cappadocia in support of Nabonidus against Cyrus the Great (559–530 BC), who defeats them. The Arabians and ‘Assyrians’ put up the strongest fight ‘because they were on their own land’, and are massacred.²⁸

All the ‘Arabias’ are ruled by the Achaemenid empire. But the Arabs in southern Palestine, centred on Gaza, within the 5th satrapy, are the only people in the empire (apart from the Colchians in the far north and the Ethiopians in the far south) not to pay taxes, but instead

to give an annual ‘gift’ to the treasury of 1000 talents (c. 30 tonnes) of frankincense.

525 BC
Arabs in Sinai assist the Persian king Cambyses (530–522 BC) in his invasion of Egypt.

c. 520 BC
Darius I (521–486 BC) sends Scylax of Caryanda on a voyage of exploration from the Indus to Egypt in which he travels along the southern coast of the Peninsula and up the Red Sea, noting that the Kamaran Islands (at the southern end of the Red Sea) are inhabited by ‘Arabs’. The information gathered by Scylax was incorporated, rather inaccurately, in a map by the Ionian geographer Hecataeus.

from the 5th century BC
Qatabanian dominance of South Arabia until the second half of the 2nd century AD.

mid 5th century BC
Herodotus describes ‘Arabia’ as being in eastern Egypt between the Nile and the Red Sea.

after 445 BC
‘Geshem (Gashmū) the Arab’, probably an official in the semi-autonomous Arab area in southern Palestine under Achaemenid rule, together with officials from other parts of the same satrapy, clashes with Nehemiah over the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

410 BC
Pharnabazus, Persian satrap of Hellespontine Phrygia, sends the Phoenician fleet to support Sparta in a war against Athens, but at a crucial moment withdraws it ‘on receiving information [probably false] that the king of the Arabs [probably based at Gaza] and the king of the Egyptians had designs upon Phoenicia.’

401 BC
Xenophon encounters Arabs living in central Mesopotamia.

c. 400 BC
Ma‘īn and Ḥaḍramawt become independent of Saba’.

343 BC
Minaean merchants working in Egypt flee from the invading Persians and safely reach the Minaean capital Qarnaw, north of Mārib, in the Yemeni Jawf.
332 BC  Alexander III, the Great, (336–323 BC) attacks Arab peasants in the Anti–Lebanon mountains during his siege of Tyre.

332 BC  Alexander attacks Gaza, which is defended by the Persian governor with the help of many Arabs, one of whom is said to have wounded Alexander. He then sweeps on into north–eastern Egypt where he conquered ‘the greater part of [this] Arabia’.

326 BC  Alexander sends Nearchos on a voyage of discovery from the mouth of the Indus to the head of the Persian Gulf and the Greeks become aware for the first time of the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula.

325 BC  Alexander sends three other naval expeditions to try to circumnavigate the Peninsula, one of which identified for the first time in Greek geography that Southern Arabia was the true source of frankincense.

312 BC  Antigonus ‘the One–eyed’ attacks the Nabataeans, a nomadic Arab tribe in southern Jordan, involved in the northern end of the incense trade.

3rd century BC  The Nabataeans settle in southern Jordan, southern Palestine and parts of the Nile Delta, eventually expanding their kingdom to the Ḥawrān in the north and to north–west Arabia in the south. They develop highly sophisticated water–conservation systems and irrigation agriculture, as well as profiting greatly from the trade in luxury goods from southern and eastern Arabia.

3rd/2nd century BC  The Greek geographer Eratosthenes describes the Lebanon and Anti–Lebanon mountains and the Beqa’ plain as being inhabited by Ituraeans and Arabs, and the eastern foothills of the Anti–Lebanon as ‘the Arabian mountains’.

218 BC  In the struggle between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies for possession of the Levant, the Arabs of the rich agricultural land of north–west Transjordan and the city of ‘Rabbatamana of the Arabs’ (modern Amman) help the Seleucid king, Antiochus III.
3rd–1st century BC  A series of queens, with the throne-name of ‘Abiël’, issue coins (imitations of Alexander the Great's coinage) in the north–east of the Persian Gulf, probably Bahrain. The name and patronym are written in Aramaic.

2nd century BC  Agatharchides of Cnidus describes the west coast of the Arabian Peninsula.

2nd century BC  A kingdom of Hagar in the north of the Peninsula mints coins (imitations of Alexander the Great's coinage) in the name of a king named Harethat. The name and title are written in the Ancient South Arabian script.

168 BC  At the time of the Maccabees, Jason, the Hellenising Jewish High Priest, flees to the Nabataean king, Aretas I, who, however, imprisons him.

166 BC  At the beginning of the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid state, the Nabataeans support the leaders of the Jewish national party (Judas Maccabaeus 164 BC, Jonathan 160 BC).

153 BC  Alexander I Balas seizes the Seleucid throne. He sends his young son, Antiochus [VI], to be educated by ‘Imalkoue [or Iamblikhos, or Malkhos] the Arab’, probably in northern Syria.

145 BC  Alexander Balas is deposed and seeks protection in an ‘Arabia’ probably around Himṣ in central Syria, but the Zabadaioi Arabs there cut off his head and send it to Ptolemy VIII of Egypt.

141–139 BC  The Arab kingdom of Characene (Mesene) is established at the head of the Persian Gulf and lasts until AD 222.

110 BC  The theoretical starting date of the Himyarite era which was used in South Arabia sporadically from the 2nd century AD, and universally there from the mid–4th to the mid–6th century. 29

before 100 BC  Himyar establishes its independence from Qataban.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st century BC (?)</td>
<td>The earliest text in the Arabic language, a 10-line funerary stele written in the Sabaic script is set up at Qaryat Dhāt Kahl (modern Qaryat al–Fa‘w) in central Arabia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93 BC</td>
<td>The Jewish leader Alexander Jannaeus attacks the Nabataean king, Obodas I, who inflicts a crushing defeat upon him.</td>
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<tr>
<td>87 BC</td>
<td>The Seleucid king of Syria, Antiochus XII, attacks the (Nabataean ?) Arabs who defeat him at the battle of Qana [= Qanawāt ?] (in southern Syria), where Antiochus is killed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 85 BC</td>
<td>The Nabataean king Aretas III gains possession of Coele (i.e. southern) Syria and Damascus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83 BC</td>
<td>Tigranes the Great, king of Armenia (died c. 55 BC), invades Syria and by 80 BC has ended the Seleucid kingdom. He rules the north of Syria, while the south is divided between the Ituraeans and the Nabataeans. He moves Arab nomads into the Amanus region (at the north–east corner of the Mediterranean).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83–80 BC</td>
<td>The Jewish ruler, Alexander Jannaeus, conquers large areas of northern Transjordan from the Nabataeans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72 BC</td>
<td>Tigranes takes Damascus from the Nabataeans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69 BC</td>
<td>Tigranes is supported by Arabs from northern Syria and from ‘the Sea of Babylon’, i.e. the head of the Persian Gulf, but these are defeated by the Roman general Lucius Licinius Lucullus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>after 67 BC</td>
<td>‘Azizus the Arab’ crowns a Seleucid pretender, Antiochus XIII, in Antioch, with the support of Sampsigeramus, the Arab king of Arethusa and Emesa [modern Hims].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67–65 BC</td>
<td>The Nabataean king, Aretas III, sides with the Jewish ruler Hyrcanus in his struggle against his brother Aristobulus II, defeats Aristobulus and besieges him on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66/65 BC</td>
<td>Pompey’s general Afranius (died 62 BC), followed by Pompey himself, subdues and receives the submissions of the Arabs around Mount Amanus, of the king of Osrhoene, of a certain ‘Alkhaudonios, the Arab who also</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
attached himself to the stronger party’, and of the Ituraeans.

65 BC

Pompey’s general, Scaurus, having completed the conquest of Syria enters Judaea, sides with Aristobulus and forces Aretas III to withdraw. Scaurus then withdraws to Damascus, and Aristobulus pursues Aretas, inflicting a crushing defeat upon him.

64 BC

Pompey declares Syria a Roman Province and marches on Petra, but has to divert his forces to Judaea because of the hostility of Aristobulus.

62 BC

Pompey sends Scaurus against Petra, but Aretas buys him off. Pompey, however, boasts of the subjugation of Aretas and mints coins celebrating it.

47 BC

The Nabataean king, Malichus I, provides Julius Caesar with cavalry in the Alexandrian War.

46–44 BC

Arabs in Syria support the insurrection against Rome which Caecilius Bassus started in Apamea of Syria.

40 BC

The Nabataean king, Malichus I, sides with the Parthians, led by Pacorus and the Roman defector Labienus, when they invade Syria and Palestine, and when the Parthians are defeated in 38 BC by the Roman general Publius Ventidius Bassus, Malichus is punished by the Romans with the exaction of a large tribute.

Between 37 and 34 BC

Marcus Antonius gives the children of Cleopatra VII (51–30 BC) parts of the Judaean, Ituraean, and Nabataean kingdoms in southern Syria, and ends the Ituraean kingdom.

32 BC

Malichus I sends troops to support Marcus Antonius at the battle of Actium. However, because the Nabataeans were not paying tribute for the part of their kingdom given to Cleopatra’s children, Marcus Antonius orders Herod the Great to invade the kingdom. In 32/31, after initial strong resistance from the Nabataeans, Herod is successful.
**25–24 BC**  
The *Praefectus Aegypti*, Gaius Aelius Gallus leads an expedition to Southern Arabia. The Nabataeans provide 1000 auxiliaries and, as a guide, Syllaeus a high-ranking politician and close associate of the Nabataean king, who was later accused of deliberately misleading the expedition.

**12–9/8 BC**  
Herod the Great makes war on the Nabataeans.

**9 BC**  
Aretas IV (probably a usurper) becomes king of Nabataea. The emperor Augustus disapproves, but is eventually persuaded not to intervene.

**7/6 BC**  
A Nabataean–Sabaic bilingual inscription dated to year 3 of the Nabataean king Aretas [IV] is set up in the temple of ʾAlmaqah at Sirwāḥ, not far from the Sabaean capital Mārib.

**c. 5 BC**  
Syllaeus is executed at Rome.

**after 4 BC**  
Aretas IV provides troops to Varus, the legate of Syria, in his expedition against the Jews, following the death of Herod the Great.

**First half of the 1st century AD**  
Sabaʾ conquers Maʿīn.

**c. AD 25**  
The Qatabanian capital Timnaʾ, is destroyed by the armies of the kingdom of Ḥaḍramawt.

**AD 36/37**  
Herod Antipas marries one of the daughters of Aretas IV, but divorces her in order to marry Herodias, the wife of his half-brother. This insult, together with border disputes, leads to a war in which Aretas defeats Herod Antipas.

**c. AD 36/37**  
Saint Paul escapes from Damascus despite the guards placed at the gates by the *ethnarch* of king Aretas IV.

**AD 40**  
Malichus II (*Mankū*, in Nabataean) succeeds Aretas IV.

**mid 1st century AD**  
Malichus [II] the king of the Nabataeans, Karibʾil Watar Yuhanʾim [I] king of Sabaʾ and Dhū Raydān, and Ilʾazz Yalit king of Ḥaḍramawt are mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a maritime handbook, written in Greek, which describes the sea-route from Egypt to India, with details of all
the ports on the way and the goods which can be exported to them and bought at them. It provides valuable information on the western and southern coasts of the Arabian Peninsula at this period.

**AD 58/67 30–122** The composition of Nabataean legal papyri which were among the documents belonging to Jews who fled from the village/district of Mahōzā’ at the south–eastern end of the Dead Sea to a cave on its western edge during the Second Jewish Revolt (led by Bar Kokhba) AD 132–135.

**AD 67** Malichus II provides the future Roman emperor Vespasian with 1000 cavalry and 5000 infantry, mainly archers, when the latter is suppressing the First Jewish Revolt.

**c. AD 75** Pliny the Elder mentions Zafār, the capital of Himyar, and describes the length of the frankincense route from Timna’ (capital of Qataban) to Gaza on the Mediterranean.

**AD 106** The Nabataean king Rabbel II dies and the Romans annex the Nabataean kingdom naming it Province Arabia, with its capital at Boṣrā, in southern Syria.

**From AD 111** The Roman emperor Trajan orders the construction of a road, the Via Nova Traiana, from Boṣrā to the Red Sea at Aila (modern al–‘Aqaba).

**AD 114-115** After his victory against the Parthians in Armenia, Trajan received the submission of Abgar VII of Edessa and the chief of the Arabs of Singara (modern Sinjār, in the Syrian Jazīra).

**AD 117** Trajan lays siege to Hatra in an area (in the Iraqi Jazīra) called ‘Arab, but fails to take it.

**c. AD 120** A detachment of the Legio VI Ferrata is stationed on the largest island in the Farasān archipelago off the coast of Yemen, and sets up a Latin inscription.

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30 This is the date range ascribed to *P.Starcky (P.Yadin 36).* See Yardeni, A. The Decipherment and Restoration of Legal Texts from the Judaean Desert: A reexamination of Papyrus Starcky (P. Yadin 36). *Scripta Classica Israelica* 20, 2001: 121–137 (p. 126).
AD 121
A Greek document from Dura Europos on the middle Euphrates mentions an Arabarchês (‘ruler of Arabs’) in that area, subject to the Parthian King of Kings, Vologases II. Late a Greek document of AD 133/134 and another of AD 180 are said to be written in ‘Europos at Arabia’.

Between AD 126 and 130
The governor of the Province of Arabia, Sextius Florentinus, is buried in an elaborate tomb at Petra.

AD 132-135
The Second Jewish Revolt, into which Jews, and possibly others, from the neighbouring Province of Arabia are drawn. The governors of the Provinces of Syria and Arabia are apparently involved in its suppression since afterwards they receive the ornamenta triumphalia.

AD 144
A detachment of the Legio II Traiana Fortis and its auxiliary troops are stationed at the port on the largest island in the Farasan archipelago off the coast of Yemen, and set up a Latin inscription to the emperor Antoninus Pius.

AD 163-165
Lucius Verus and Avidius Cassius wage what the emperor Marcus Aurelius describes as ‘that Arabian and Parthian war’ in the Jazīra between the Tigris and Euphrates.

2nd half of the 2nd century AD
Qataban is annexed by Hadramawt.

AD 166-169
A temple, probably for the worship of the god ʾIlh, is built at Rawwāfah, a small site in north–west Arabia, by the Arab tribe of Thamūd under the auspices of two successive Roman governors of the Province of Arabia (Quintus Antistius Adventus and Lucius Claudius Modestus) 31. It is furnished with a dedication in Greek and Nabataean Aramaic to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus.

AD 175-177 The ‘chief citizen’ (primus civitatis) and people of the former Nabataean city of Ḥegrā (modern Madāʾin Sāliḥ, in north–west Arabia), set up a Latin inscription dedicated to the emperor Marcus Aurelius recording the restoration of the city walls by the (previously unknown) governor of the Province, Iulius Firmanus, and a centurion of the Legio III Cyrenaica. 32

AD 187 While he is governor of Syria, Septimius Severus marries Iulia Domna of the Arab priestly ruling family of Emesa (modern Ḥimṣ, in central Syria). She, with her sister Iulia Maesa, her niece Iulia Mammaea, and her descendants, remain a major force in Roman politics until AD 235.

AD 190–275 The first invasions of South Arabia by the Abyssinians, who settle in the Tihāma, along the Red Sea coast of Yemen, and intervene on behalf of a succession of different parties in the wars between the South Arabian polities.

AD 193 Septimius Severus becomes Roman emperor.

AD 195–204 The Province of Syria is split into two provinces and the northern Ḥawrān is added to the Province of Arabia.

AD 195 Septimius Severus attacks the Osrhoenians, Adiabenians and the ‘inner’ Arabs i.e. (those of the Jazīra, within the Roman empire). As a result, he takes the titles Parthicus, Arabicus and Adiabenicus.

AD 199 Septimius Severus attacks Hatra, with its many Arab subjects, but fails to take it.

Early 3rd century AD First evidence of Christianity in Boṣrā, the capital of the Province of Arabia.

AD 200 Septimius Severus attacks Hatra again and lays siege to it, but again fails to take it.

AD 218–222 Elagabalus, from the ‘Arab’ city of Emesa (modern Ḥimṣ, in central Syria) reigns as Roman emperor.

c. AD 200 The kingdom of Ḥaḍramawt reaches the height of its power.

First quarter of the 3rd century AD

The king of Saba’, Sha’irum Awtar, launches two expeditions against the capital of the Arab tribe of Kinda, Qaryat Dhāt Kahl (modern Qaryat al-Fa’w, on the north–west edge of the Empty Quarter). In another expedition, he conquers Ḥadramawt, destroying its capital, Shabwa.

AD 224
The Sasanian dynasty overthrows the Parthians and takes power in Iran.

AD 230–240
Origen calls 2 Church Councils in the Province of Arabia.

AD 241
The Sasanian King of Kings, Shāpūr I, captures Hatra.

AD 244
Marcus Iulius Philippus Araps (‘the Arab’), from Shahbā’ in the Ḥawrān (southern Syria), becomes emperor. The soubriquet ‘Araps’ refers to his origins in the Province of Arabia.

Mid 3rd century AD
A gravestone in Nabataean and Greek is set up at Umm al-Jimāl (northern–eastern Jordan) to the memory of Fahru son of Sulay, the tutor of Gadhīma king of the Arab tribe of Tanūkh which had moved from Bahrāin and settled on the Euphrates.

c. AD 250
The Sabaean king Ilshara Yahḍib II and his brother Ya’zil Bayyin campaign against the Abyssinians in the western coastal plain, against the city of Najrān in the north, and against the Himyarite kings Shammar Yuhāḥmid and Karib’il Ayfa‘.

AD 253–260
The Sasanian King of Kings, Shāpūr I, overruns the whole of Roman Asia Minor, Syria (including Arabia in the Jazīra), and the Province of Arabia, defeating the Roman army and capturing the emperor Valerian I in 259.

AD 262
Odainathus, king of Palmyra, expels the Sasanians from Syria (including Arabia in the Jazīra) and the Province of Arabia, and invades Mesopotamia reaching the Sasanian capital, Ctesiphon.

AD 267
Odainathus is murdered and is succeeded by his son Vaballatus, though real power is wielded by Odenathus’ widow Zenobia.
AD 269–270  
Zenobia abandons the Mesopotamian conquests and initiates the conquest of Egypt and Asia Minor. Vaballatus declares himself emperor and takes as one of his titles *Arabicus Maximus*, probably referring to the expulsion (by his father) of the Sasanians from the ‘Arabia’ in the Jazīra. Note, however, that there is no evidence that Odenathus, Zenobia or Vaballatus saw themselves, or were seen by others as ‘Arabs.’

AD 272  
The emperor Aurelian defeats Zenobia and takes Palmyra.

c. AD 280  
The Himyarite king Yasirum Yuhanʿim and/or his son Shammar Yuharʿish finally conquers the Sabaean kingdom.

AD 293  
The Sasanian King of Kings, Narses (AD 293–302), erects an inscription in Middle Persian and Parthian at Paikuli 33 (Kurdistan) listing the rulers who paid homage to him, among whom is an ‘Am[rw] Lhmʾdyn ml(ka) / ‘Amrw Lhmyšn mlka, which is probably the earliest reference to the Arab Nasrid dynasty (of the tribal group of Lakhm) in southern Iraq.

AD 298  
Peace is established between Rome and Iran leaving the Jazīra as far as the Tigris in the hands of the Romans.

By AD 298  
The northern border of the Province of Arabia is extended almost to Damascus, and north–west roughly to the River Jordan at the latitude of Tyre. At the same time, all the territory which had belonged to Arabia south and south–west of the Wādī al–Ḥāsā (at the latitude of the southern end of the Dead Sea), was now included in the Province of *Palaestina Salutaris*.

end of the 3rd century AD  
The Himyarite king Shammar Yuharʾish conquers Ḥaḍramawt and unites South Arabia in a single kingdom.

By the end of the 3rd century AD  
The nomadic Arab tribe of Ṭayyiʾ had moved from northern Arabia into Mesopotamia. Its

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name soon became the normal term (Ṭayyāyē) for ‘Arab nomads’ in Syriac literature.

early 4th century AD

A large part of the Arab tribe of Kinda, who had taken part in the Himyarite conquest of the kingdom of Ḥaḍramawt, establish themselves in the west of Wādī Ḥaḍramawt.

AD 325

The list of those attending the First Council of Nicaea includes five bishops from the Province of Arabia.

AD 326

The Sasanian King of Kings, Shāpūr II, launches an attack which crosses the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula from the al–Ḥasā [al–Ahsā'] oasis in the north east to Yathrib (modern al–Madīna) in the west.

AD 328

Mara’ al–Qays son of ‘Amr, ‘king of all [the country called] ‘Arab [or king of all the Arabs]’ and possibly the second Nasrid king, is buried near a Roman fort at a watering–place called al–Namāra in the Syrian desert. 34 His five–line epitaph, written in the Arabic language using the Nabataean script, describes his achievements, including the conquest of a number of powerful Arab tribes and even an attack on the South Arabian city of Najrān in the realm of king Shammar Yuhar‘ish, the founder of the Himyarite empire.

c. AD 345

The Abyssinian king ‘Ezānā IV converts to Christianity.

c. AD 350

The ecclesiastical writer Philostorgios reports on the first Christian and Jewish missionary activity in South Arabia. Churches are built in Zafār and other parts of the kingdom. From this point onwards almost all the Ancient


South Arabian religious inscriptions are monotheist and pagan temples start to be abandoned.

2nd half of the 4th century AD

The first epigraphic evidence for the breaking of the Mārib dam.

**c. AD 358**

The Province of *Palaestina* is divided into three and the southern area formerly part of *Provincia Arabia* becomes *Palaestina Tertia*.

**AD 363**

The emperor Julian ('the Apostate') (AD 361–363) invades the part of Mesopotamia under Iranian control, with Saracens (nomadic Arabs) taking an active part on both sides. According to the rhetorician Libanius of Antioch, Julian was killed by a Saracen.

**AD 373–378**

Unidentified Saracens attack and massacre Christian hermits in the vicinity of Mount Sinai. At the same time, other Saracens try to defend the monastery of Rhaithou (also in Sinai) from an attack by the Blemmyes (from the Sudan) who, however, defeat them and massacre the monks. However, more Saracens from Pharan (also in Sinai) attack the Blemmyes as they return to their ships and annihilate them.

**c. AD 375–378**

Mavia (Arabic *Māwiya*), queen of those Saracens who had been allies of the Romans, attacks and devastates the border regions of the Provinces of Phoenicia, Arabia, and Palestine as far as Egypt. She and her tribesmen are only persuaded to withdraw on the promise that, Moses, a Christian hermit, would be consecrated as their bishop. When this was done, he proceeds to convert many Saracens to Christianity. Mavia marries her daughter to Victor, the Roman *Magister Equitum* of Oriens, a match requiring special dispensation from the emperor.

**AD 378**

During the siege of Constantinople by the Goths, the emperor Valens (AD 364–378) brings in Saracen troops who terrify the Goths.

**AD 383**

A revolt by Saracen *foederati* (allies of the Romans) is crushed by the Romans under Theodosius I (AD 379–395).
AD 383  The king of Ḥimyar, Malkikarib Yuhanʿim, and his sons profess monotheism. Although the deity is described simply as ‘Lord of heaven and earth’, it is thought that they espoused Judaism, possibly as an expression of neutrality since Ḥimyar was situated between Christian Ethiopia and Zoroastrian Iran.

First third of the 5th century AD

Under the king Abikarib Asʿad the Himyarite kingdom reached its greatest territorial extent.

AD 421–422  The Nasrid Arab king, Mundhir I, intervenes on the Sasanian side in Theodosius II's (AD 408–450) first war against Iran, but suffers a disastrous defeat at Nisibis.

AD 441  Saracens, probably from within the Sasanian empire, join the Iranian attack on Nisibis in Theodosius II’s second war with Iran.

Between AD 451 and 535

The southern frontier of the Province of Arabia is brought further north probably to the Wādī Mujib (between Madaba and Kerak in modern Jordan).

AD 454  Another breach of the Mārib dam is repaired by the Himyarite king Shuraḥbiʿil Yaʿfur

Before AD 459  Large numbers of ‘Saracens’, as well as some ‘Himyarites’, come to visit St Simeon Stylites at Telanissos (modern Dayr Simʿān, in northern Syria) and are converted to Christianity.

Between AD 470 and 475

According to a tradition known only from a Geʿez manuscript, a South Arabian Christian priest named Azqīr was martyred at Najrān on the orders of the Himyarite king Shuraḥbiʿil Yakkuf.

Before AD 473  A Saracen chief called Amorkesos (Imruʿ al-Qays?) leaves the Iranians, with whom he has been allied, and fights other Saracens in Roman territory on the border with the Iranian empire. He then establishes himself on the island of Iotabe, at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, driving out the Roman
customs officers and enriching himself on the customs dues. Having sent, Petrus, the bishop of his tribe, to negotiate with the emperor Leo (AD 457–474), he is invited to Constantinople in 473 and is showered with honours including the title of phylarch. The island was recovered by the Byzantines in 498.

**AD 497–502**  
Jabala the Jafnid with Maʿdikarib and Hujr sons of al-Ḥārith the Thaʿlabite raid the Roman frontier. In 502, the emperor Anastasius (AD 491–518) concludes a treaty with them, and with another al-Ḥārith, leader of the tribe of Kinda.

**c. AD 500**  
Abyssinian forces, under a general called Ḥyōnaʾ, invade South Arabia and make Marthadʾīlān Yanūf king of Ḥimyar. Persecutions of the Jews begin.

**AD 502–506**  
The Nasrids and the Jafnids fight each other within the context of the war between the Iranians and the Byzantines.

**AD 503**  
The Nasrids under al-Ḥundhir (later to be al-Ḥundhir III, reigned AD 505–554) invade the Provinces of Arabia and Palaestina Prima reaching the monasteries of the Judaean Desert.

**c. AD 519**  
Probably as a result of the refusal by Justin I to renew the Byzantine ‘subsidy’ to Iran, the Nasrid al-Ḥundhir III attacks Byzantine territory capturing two Byzantine commanders, Timostratus son of Silvanus and John son of Lucas.

**AD 519**  
The Abyssinians invade South Arabia and place the Christian Maʿdikarib Yaʿfur on the throne.

**AD 521**  
Maʿdikarib Yaʿfur leads an expedition into central Arabia against the Iranians and their Arab allies. He receives the support of the Banū Thaʿlabī (called in the commemorative inscription, 35 ‘the Arabs of the Romans’) and the tribe of Muḍar.

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35 This is Ry 510 at Maʿsal west of Riyadh.
AD 522    Following the death of Maʿdīkarib Yaʿfur, Yūsuf Ashʿar (Dhū Nuwās), a follower of Judaism, seizes the Himyarite throne.

AD 522–523    The Himyarite king Yūsuf attacks the South Arabian Christians and their Abyssinian allies in the capital Zafār and on the western coast. With the help of the Arab tribe of Kinda, he besieges Najrān, and after its surrender he massacres the Christian inhabitants.  

AD 524    (January–February) The emperor Justin I (AD 518–527) sends an emissary, Abraham father of Nonnosus, to the Nasrid king al–Mundhir III, to negotiate the release of the Byzantine commanders he captured in about AD 519. Negotiations take place at the Conference of Ramla (south-east of al–Hīra, in southern Mesopotamia), at which the participants also receive reports of the massacre of the Christians of Najrān.

AD 525    An Abyssinian expedition, under Kālēb Ella Aṣbeḥa, defeats and kills Yūsuf and installs Simyafaʿ Ashwaʿ on the throne, bringing South Arabia under Abyssinian (and thus Christian) control. Gregentius, bishop of Zafār, rebuilds the cathedral there which had been destroyed by Yūsuf.

c. AD 525–528    The Nasrid al–Mundhir III is expelled from his capital al–Hīra, and is replaced by al–Hārith (Arethas) of Kinda, who eventually gives his daughter Hind in marriage to al–Mundhir. She remains a devout Christian, while al–Mundhir remains a pagan.

AD 527    Al–Mundhir III invades the vicinity of Emesa and ApamAEA in central Syria carrying off many captives including, it is said, 400

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virgins whom he sacrificed to the goddess, al−ʿUzza.

**AD 528**

Following the accession of the emperor Justinian I (AD 527) the Jafnids return to Byzantine service and participate in a punitive expedition against al−Mundhir III, as well as in the battle of Thannuris (528, where the Byzantines were defeated and Jabala the Jafnid phylarch was killed), the suppression of the Samaritan revolt (529), and the battle of Callinicum on the Euphrates (531), at which al−Mundhir III was victorious.

**AD 528/529**

One of the 2 earliest documents in the Arabic script, a graffito at Jabal Usays, southern Syria, records that the author, of the tribe of Aws, was sent there by the Jafnid king al−Hārith (died AD 559), presumably during the campaign against al−Mundhir III.

**c. AD 530**

Justinian I installs members of the tribe of Kinda in Palestine.

**AD 530/531**

Justinian I (AD 527–565) sends an embassy to Hellēsthēaioi, king of the Abyssinians, at Aksum, and the latter's vassal, Esimiphaioi the Christian king of Ḥimyar, to try to forge an alliance against the Iranians.

**after AD 531**

An Abyssinian, Abraha, makes himself king of Ḥimyar, independent of the king in Aksum, and under him and his sons, the country remains officially Christian until AD 575.

**AD 536**

Drought in the Arabian Peninsula drives some 15,000 Saracens into the Byzantine province of Euphratensis, after they had been refused help by the Nasrid al−Mundhir III.

**AD 537/539**

A ‘border dispute’ between the Nasrids and the Jafnids ends in the second war with Iran (540–545) of Justinian I’s reign.

**AD 548**

Another breach of the Marib dam. It is renovated by Abraha

**AD 552**

Abraha’s fourth campaign in Central Arabia

**AD 546–561**

Spasmodic warfare between the Jafnids and the Nasrids.
AD 554  The Nasrid al-Mundhir III is killed in a battle against the Jafnid al-Ḥārith at Qinnasrīn (north central Syria).

AD 559-560  The last dated South Arabian monumental inscription so far discovered. [Note that the most recent dated everyday document, on a stick, dates to AD 522] 37

AD 569  The Jafnid leader al-Ḥārith dies and is succeeded by his son al-Mundhir.

AD 569  The Nasrid king ‘Amr son of Hind is killed by the poet ‘Amr son of Kulthūm.

AD 569-570  The Nasrid king Qabūs invades Jafnid territory but is driven back and crushingly defeated by al-Mundhir near the Nasrid capital al-Ḥīra.

AD 569/570  A Syriac letter is ‘subscribed’ by 137 Archimandrites (abbots of monasteries) who identify themselves as coming from the Province of Arabia. 38

c. AD 570  The birth of the Prophet Muḥammad in Mecca.

AD 572-575  The Jafnid al-Mundhir withdraws from Byzantine service after Justin II (AD 565-578), on the verge of insanity, tries to have him overthrown. The Nasrids and the Iranians take the opportunity to ravage the Byzantine eastern provinces.

AD 575  The Jafnid al-Mundhir restores relations with the Byzantines and, shortly after, attacks the Nasrids.

AD 575  The Sasanians conquer South Arabia. Yemen becomes an Iranian province.


c. AD 578  Al–Mundhir again defeats the Nasrids.

AD 580  Al–Mundhir travels to Constantinople where he is crowned by the emperor Tiberius II Constantine (AD 578–582).

AD 580/581  Al–Mundhir and a Jafnid army participate in a Byzantine attempt to attack the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon, under the leadership of the future emperor Maurice. The expedition is a failure, but al–Mundhir defeats a Nasrid army.

AD 581  Al–Mundhir is captured and taken to Constantinople where he is held under house-arrest until the accession of the emperor Maurice in 582, after which he is exiled to Sicily.

AD 581–582  In anger at the treatment of al–Mundhir, his son, al–Nuʾmān, leads a Jafnid army in rebellion against the Byzantines, repeatedly overrunning and plundering towns and districts in the provinces of Syria and Arabia, and retiring to the inner desert with the spoils. Eventually, he overpowers and kills the dux of Boṣrā who had refused to hand over al–Mundhir’s property in the city, but when the citizens produce it the Jafnids refrain from looting the city.

AD 582  Shortly after the accession of the emperor Maurice (AD 582–602), al–Nuʾmān travels to Constantinople to attempt to negotiate the release of his father, al–Mundhir. Maurice tries unsuccessfully to make him renounce Miaphysitism and accept the Chalcedonian doctrine. Al–Nuʾmān refuses and leaves in anger but is arrested on his way home and kept prisoner in Constantinople.

End of the 6th century AD

The final bursting of the Marib Dam and the desertion of the oasis.

AD 602  With the accession of the emperor Phocas (AD 602–610), al–Mundhir is allowed to return home from exile.

c. AD 602  The Nasrid king, al–Nuʾmān III is murdered on the orders of the Iranian King of Kings, Khusraw II Parviz, and this brings to an end Nasrid rule in al–Ḥīra.
AD 604  The Arab tribe of Bakr defeats Iranian forces at the battle of Dhū Qār.

AD 613  The Jafnid army is defeated by the Iranian army during the Sasanian invasion of the eastern Byzantine provinces.

AD 622  The Hijra, the Prophet Muḥammad’s emigration from Mecca to the oasis of Yathrib (later al-Madīna). The theoretical beginning of the Muslim era, though it does not come into use until AH 17 (AD 638).

AD 622/623  ‘Long-haired Saracens’ fighting for the Iranians, probably in Armenia, are captured by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius.

AD 628  Saracens form part of the emperor Heraclius’ army at his victory over the Iranians at Nineveh.

AD 629  The Prophet Muḥammad returns to Mecca.

AD 632  The death of the Prophet Muḥammad and the election of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr.

AD 632  The Iranian governor of Ṣanʿā’, the capital of Yemen, converts to Islam and sends troops to augment the armies of the nascent Islamic state in the wars of conquest, but the conversion of the whole of Yemen takes much longer.