A rock inscription mentioning Thaʿlabah, an Arab king from Ghassān

This article is the edition and commentary of an inscription discovered some time ago in the area of Eilat. It is written in a script that is transitional between Nabataean and Arabic, is presumably dated to the late fifth century AD and mentions an Arab king.

Keywords: Eilat, inscription, Thaʿlabah, Ghassān, Arab king

Introduction (U. Avner)
In 1979 the inscription discussed here was discovered by one of the writers (Avner) on a red sandstone boulder, situated adjacent to an ancient road, 8 km west-north-west of Eilat (Figs 1–2).1 The road is a part of both Darb Ghazzah and Darb al-Ḥajj al-Maghribi, the former connecting the Red Sea with the Mediterranean, the latter connecting North Africa and Egypt with Mecca, via Ayla (ʿAqaba).2

When found, the script was recognised as being transitional between Nabataean and Arabic and few inscriptions of this kind were known at the time.3 A photograph of the inscription (Figs 3–4) was shown to two epigraphists, M. Sharon and the late J. Naveh, but with the exception of some characters, it remained undeciphered. In 2012 the photograph was sent to J.F. Healey, who in turn, showed it to L. Nehmē, who read the complete text:

\[ \text{‘nh ’dyw b/r} \]
\[ \text{i ’lbh ’l-mlk} \]

‘I am ʿAdiyū son of Taʿlabah the king’.

Below the inscription there is a rock drawing representing a dog behind a male ibex, a very common combination in rock art in the Negev, Sinai, Jordan and beyond.4

The reading is absolutely certain, none of the letters being ambiguous. The script is indeed clearly transitional between Nabataean Aramaic and Arabic and may even be considered closer to Arabic than to Nabataean. The commentary of the inscription will be divided into remarks on the letter forms and on the grammar (by Nehmē) and remarks on the historical background of the text (by Robin).5

Palaeographic and grammatical discussion (L. Nehmē)
The letter forms are typical of the so-called transitional script, which is usually opposed to the ‘calligraphic’ (Macdonald 2003: 52) or ‘classical’ Nabataean script

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1 The boulder, c.2 x 1.7 x 1.5 m, is situated in Sinai, 40 m from the Israel-Egypt border (old Israel/British grid-1369289037; UTM-3276068096; long. 34.8687, lat. 29.6008, 705 m above sea level); it was accessible until April 1984.

2 Many remains of Darb al-Ḥajj are still preserved today between the Egyptian border and the city of Eilat, including ʿAqabat Ayla, the winding, steep descent towards the Red Sea, with a series of adjacent pilgrim camps. Two Mamluk inscriptions were found in this section of the road (Woolley & Lawrence 1915: 161; Rothenberg 1961: 182, pl. 86) as well as a few more fragmented ones (unpublished). The road is obviously older than the Muslim pilgrimage. A survey of ancient roads in the southern Negev and eastern Sinai (see Fig. 1) indicated that the entire map of desert roads was already well established by the sixth millennium BC and was actually used throughout the last 8000 years (Avner 1990: 138; 2002: ch. 6).

3 This kind of script is labelled ‘post-classical Nabataean’ by C. Robin.

4 An article on the symbolic meaning of this frequent combination is now under preparation by Avner.

5 For a complete bibliography of South Arabian Inscriptions, refer to Kitchen 2000.
on the one hand and to early Arabic on the other. The main characteristics of this script, which clearly shows
the development of the Nabataean script into what will become Arabic, were set out in a recently published
article. Some of the letters are, of course, not particularly ‘transitional’ and would not be anachronistic in a
Nabataean text, but this is because they have more or less the same shape in Nabataean and in transitional
texts in general. These are: the \( n \), the vertical stroke of which is, however, usually longer in
texts in general. These are: the less the same shape in Nabataean and in transitional

\[ \text{texts, see a provisional list of} \]

\[ \text{dot over it, a feature which is found both in Nabataean} \]

\[ \text{northern Nabataean text, but this is because they have more or} \]

\[ \text{less the same shape in Nabataean and in transitional} \]

\[ \text{texts in general. These are: the} \]

\[ \text{n, the vertical stroke of which is, however, usually longer in \textit{‘calligraphic’} Na-} \]

\[ \text{bataean; the} \]

\[ \text{d, the only particularity of which is the} \]

\[ \text{do} \]

\[ \text{t over it, a feature which is found both in Nabataean} \]

\[ \text{texts and in transitional ones (see a provisional list of} \]

\[ \text{dotted} \]

\[ \text{d in Nehmé 2010: 55–59); and the} \]

\[ \text{l, which does} \]

\[ \text{not have the loop one finds in a large number of Nabataean} \]

\[ \text{texts but is a simple vertical stroke ligatured to} \]

\[ \text{the left through a small horizontal line. This form is,} \]

\[ \text{however, already found in first-century AD texts from} \]

\[ \text{Mada’in Salihi}. \]

In transitional inscriptions, the loop of the Nabataean \textit{alif} has disappeared. Having become smaller and smaller
(see for instance QN 2 in Nehmé 2010: 71), it is finally reduced, at the end of the process, to a very short vertical stem from which a longer one goes up to the right. The longer stem corresponds to the diagonal stroke of the
Nabataean'. At the end of the development, the short vertical stem disappears and only a diagonal stroke, the
ancestor of the Arabic straight \textit{alif}, is kept (Macdonald 2009: 218). In our inscription, the short stem is still present as it is also in ARNA.Nab 17 (Fig. 5; on this important text, see Macdonald 2009 and Nehmé 2010: 66–67), but whereas the long stroke is diagonal in ARNA.Nab 17, it is
almost horizontal in our inscription, a feature which is not often encountered in the texts, the closest parallel being an

\[ \text{inscription from Umm Jadhayidh in north-west Arabia,} \]

\[ \text{UJadh 4 (Fig. 6).} \]

There are two examples of \( b \) in the inscription, in \( br \) and in \( tlkh \). The first one would be at home in a ‘calli-

\[ \text{graphic’} \]

\[ \text{Nabataean text, whereas the second one leans} \]

\[ \text{backwards and has therefore almost exactly the same} \]

\[ \text{shape as the} \]

\[ \text{n in ‘nh. In Arabic, the} \]

\[ \text{b and the} \]

\[ \text{n are, of} \]

\[ \text{course, homomorphs but vertical.} \]

There are two examples of \( h \) in the text, both in final position, in ‘nh and in ‘tlkh. Their form is different from
the one it has in ‘calligraphic’ Nabataean and results from the way it developed in the documents written rapidly in
ink (Yardeni 2000: B, 242). It is made of one uninter-
rupted line, starting from the upper right end of the letter, slanting down to the left and going up again in order to
create a loop. For other examples of final \( h \), see UJadh 297 (Fig. 7), 298 (Fig. 8) and 309 (Nehmé 2010).

There are also two examples of ‘, in ‘dyw and in ‘tlkh. The main characteristics of the transitional ‘ is that it pro-
gressively sits on the line, as opposed to most examples of Nabataean ‘, and also that it starts being ligatured to both
the preceding and the following letter. This is also the case in Arabic, as opposed to Nabataean where it is joined only to
the following letter and not from the right. In ‘tlkh, the ‘ is indeed clearly ligatured on both sides. A good parallel
may be found in Ar 19 (Fig. 9; Nehmé 2010: 66).

The shape of the \( w \) is not particularly evolved but note that the ligature from the preceding letter meets the \( w \) at
the back of the loop. This, added to the fact that the vertical stroke curves slightly to the left, is characteristic of its development towards Arabic.

The shape of the only \( y \) in the text is particularly evolved: it has completely lost the backward flourish of
the Nabataean \( y \) and has become a short line slightly leaning leftwards, ligatured to the left through a horizontal one
of the same length. By comparison, the \( n \) and the \( b \) both lean rightwards and have strikingly similar shapes. In
other, less developed texts, the \( y \) is still a wavy line, as it is in ARNA.Nab 17 (see Fig. 5, in ‘wydw and šlymw), which
shows very well the development of the letter’s form.

The \( m \) and the final \( k \) occur once each in ‘lmlk. This \( m \) is highly characteristic of the transitional \( m \). It is a small
circle, the bottom part of which was squashed in order to
make it sit on the line better. It is ligatured from the right

\[ \text{See Macdonald 2009: 217: ‘the “Arabic script”, in all its} \]

\[ \text{forms, simply represents the later phases of the Nabataean} \]

\[ \text{script, i.e. in terms of graphic development there are not} \]

\[ \text{two scripts — Nabataean and Arabic — but simply one} \]

\[ \text{script, developing over centuries and used first to write the} \]

\[ \text{Aramaic language, then sometimes Aramaic sometimes Ara-} \]

\[ \text{bic, then Arabic’.} \]

\[ \text{Nehmé 2010. This author is also preparing, as part of a Habilita-} \]

\[ \text{tion’s thesis, a commented edition of all the texts in transitional} \]

\[ \text{characters recorded during the Darb al-Bakra Archaeological} \]

\[ \text{and Epigraphic Survey in north-west Arabia, undertaken under} \]

\[ \text{the direction of A. al-Ghabban.} \]

\[ \text{See examples in the tables published in Healey 1993: 292–297,} \]

\[ \text{for instance in JSNab 2, 8, 30, etc.} \]

\[ \text{This inscription, and most of those used here as examples, are} \]

\[ \text{part of the Darb al-Bakra corpus, the publication of which is in} \]

\[ \text{preparation in Riyadh, the Nabataean inscriptions being the} \]

\[ \text{responsibility of the author.} \]
and to the left between the bottom of the letter and halfway up it.\textsuperscript{10} The form of ʾl-mlk in this text should be compared to that of ʾl-mlk in UJadh 109 (Fig. 10, Nehmé 2010: 76–77). The letters are almost identical and the m in UJadh 109 is just slightly more circular, which explains the position of the ligature on each side. The final k is also typically transitional, with the upper flourish at its top.

There is only one r in the text, in br, and the form of the letter is unfortunately obscured by a crack in the rock. The general shape of the letter is, however, relatively clear. It is different from the ‘calligraphic’ Nabataean r: it has lost its upper flourish, which was made either of a small horizontal or diagonal line or of a small cupped top, and it is relatively short, with the bottom part of the stroke leaning slightly to the left. It is ligatured from the right a third of the way up, a feature that is regularly found in transitional texts (see for example UJadh 297, Fig. 7). The question as to whether bn should be read instead of br is answered by a close examination of the letter in this text and of the final n in other transitional ones. It shows that the final n almost always keeps a relatively long tail (see for instance UJadh 367, Fig. 11), even when it has a leftward flourish at the bottom. Moreover, the r is usually joined from the right no higher than halfway up the stem, whereas the n is usually joined from the right on the upper half of the stem. There is therefore little possibility of r being confused with n. M.C.A. Macdonald has recently suggested that br, along with words such as dkyr, slm and bṭb, may be a ‘linguistic fossil’ used as an ideogram and would therefore not inform us on the language the author spoke.\textsuperscript{11} This is possible and would explain the ongoing use of br in the texts. One last remark ought to be made about the r: in ‘calligraphic’ Nabataean, the forms of d and r are identical; in the texts written in transitional characters, they are clearly distinguished. It is therefore ironic that it is largely in the transitional script that a dot is often added to d, even though there is no danger of it being mistaken for another letter.

The only t in the text is in initial position, in t’lbh, where it obviously represents a ʿ. It has a typically transitional shape, with a wavy line reminiscent of the wavy line of the transitional y, which is, however, smaller in size. It should be noted that this form of the letter is the norm in

\textsuperscript{10} I have shown elsewhere (Nehmé 2010: 51–52) that the position of the ligature on each side of the m depends both on the form of the m (the more it is circular, the more the ligature starts from the middle of the letter and the flatter it is at its base, the more the ligature starts from the bottom of the letter) and on the letter which precedes it and follows it.

\textsuperscript{11} Macdonald 2010b: 20. He recalls that br is used instead of bn in the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions of Namārāh, Zebed, Jabal Usays and Harrān. C. Robin preferred to consider that bn should be read in these texts (2006: 331) and suggested that their authors confused the writing of the final n with that of the r (see the discussion in Macdonald 2010b: n. 41).
the papyri. A very telling parallel can be found in a text from al-Mābiyāt (al-Muraykhī, in press), dated AD 280, where the difference in size between the ṣ and the t in mytt is visible (Fig. 12, third line, second word; see also Fig. 7, UJadh 297, for other examples). It is still difficult to trace the development between the ‘calligraphic’ Nabataean form and the transitional one, and the process described by A. Yardeni, who suggests an intermediary phase where the left stroke of the t is looped, faces the problem that only one looped t was found in the transitional texts (Yardeni 2000, 2: 262–263).

Concerning the date of the text (on palaeographic grounds) one may say that it is certainly dated to the interval between the third and the fifth centuries AD but we may be more precise. Considering the evolved form of all the diagnostic letters, it seems that everything points to a date either in the fourth or the fifth century AD. In fact, all the letters are found in the two texts dated to the fifth century which are known so far: UJadh 109 and the text from Sakākā dated AD 428 (Fig. 13; Nehmē 2010: 72–73). We lack examples of transitional inscriptions dated to the fourth century but our text is perfectly at home in the fifth.

The Tha’labā inscription is in fact much closer to Old Arabic than it is to Nabataean and it is unfortunate that such important letters as the g, the h and the š do not occur in it. If one looks carefully at the letter forms, however,
one can see that the text is obviously much earlier than the Jabal Usays inscription, although it is very difficult to say how much earlier. The main differences between the two are summarised in Table 1.
There is thus still a distance between the script of the Tha’labah text and that of the Jabal Usays and it is therefore better to label the former transitional rather than Old Arabic.

**Grammatical analysis**

Two points in this text deserve comments: the use of the first person singular independent personal pronoun 'nh and that of the Arabic definite article 'l. 'nh has previously been found only once, in a Nabataean inscription copied by J. Euting between 'Taiyamā and Ḥā'il, *CIS* II 340, where the word seems to be clear on the facsimile published in the *CIS*. It is however the normal way to express 'I in the Nabataean papyri of Naḥal Ḥever, where it is always spelled 'anā, which is normal in Aramaic documents. It is not surprising that it is used much more widely in the private documents written on papyrus that in the inscriptions. In our text, the author must mean 'I am' rather than simply 'I' since no verb is given after the names. In Classical Arabic, the form of the pronoun is 'anah, which is normal in Aramaic documents. It is usually taken as an indication that a text is written in the Arabic language but is its presence in this inscription really sufficient to identify it as being written in Arabic? The question is important, especially when dealing with late texts, such as the present one and UJadh 109, dated AD 455–456. In the latter, the use of the verb 'dhhw, which probably means 'they introduced', is an additional argument for considering it as Arabic, at least partly. In Nabataean and transitional inscriptions, the Arabic article is significantly used either in personal names (which do not indicate the language spoken by those who bore them), in the toponym 'l-hgr or in 'l-mlk. The use of 'l-hgr/l-hgrw, as opposed to hgr (Hegrā) in several inscriptions, may suggest that the name of the city was Arabicised or Aramaised, depending on what one considers to be the original name. In order to regard the language of the Tha’labah inscription as Arabic, one would have to explain the Aramaic forms 'nh and br. Unfortunately, br may be a fossil and we have too few examples of 'nh/n' in transitional/pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions to decide whether 'nh is also a fossil or represents a genuine Aramaic or genuine Arabic feature.

**The names**

The name 'dy w, 'Adiyū, is attested in the Nabataean inscriptions, most recently in two graffiti discovered in the

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12 Yadin et al. 2002: index p. 405, seventeen occurrences recorded. For attestations of 'nh in Aramaic other than Nabataean, see Robin & Gorea 2002: 508, n. 13.

13 On which see most recently Macdonald 2010b; 2010c. In the Harran inscription, which is a little later that the Jabal Usays one, 'anā ('n') is used.

14 A. al-Jallad has recently suggested (forthcoming) that because the definite article 'l- occurs in non-Arabic North Arabian languages and is absent in many ancient and modern varieties of Arabic, it is better to explain it as an areal feature and, as such, its presence in a text is of little use for classification.

15 An alternative reading was proposed by R. Hoyland (2007: 63; see also Hoyland 2011: 112 n. 53). He suggests that the third letter may be a g rather than a h and that the set of letters in which it occurs may thus be read ʾg ḥlw mrw 'l-mlk, which he translates as ‘when Amrū the king flourished or departed’. Although this third letter may indeed be a h or a g, because of its vertical character I prefer to read it as a h.

16 UJadh 330 in the transitional script and Ar 20 in the Nabataean script, both of which are unpublished texts from the Darb al-Bakra. To these should be added the 'l-hgrw of JSNab 17.
A new mention of an Arab king from Ghassān
(C. Robin)

A likely identification of T’lbh

If one looks for ‘Adi son of Tha’labā’ in Ibn al-Kalbī’s genealogies, two figures appear. The first one belongs to the descendants of Bakr b. Wā’il, a tribe of north-eastern Arabia, and the second to that of Fahm which is Tanūkḥ, i.e. a tribe of the Lower Euphrates (Caskel 1966, I: tables 162 and 298). Neither of these two ‘Adi is a satisfactory candidate for the author of our text. The search for a ‘king’ named Tha’labā is fortunately more productive.17 Arab sources, but also Ḥīmyarite, Syriac and Greek ones, mention a namesake towards the end of the fifth century and at the beginning of the sixth. Such an abundance of documents is exceptional.

A. The Arab-Islamic tradition

The Arab-Islamic tradition mentions a king Tha’labā on the southern margins of the bilād al-Shām. The most significant text is that of the Arab historian Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār (d. in AD 860/245 AH), who recalls in detailed form this king’s rise to power, after the descendants of Sāliḥ (tribe of Ḥudayr) and before those of the House of Jafna (tribe of Ghassān):

‘The reason for which Ghassān received the dignity of king from the Romans was that the Ḍajā’im, i.e. the banū Ḏu’l qā’im b. Ḥamāta b. Sa’d b. Sāliḥ b. ‘Amr b. al-Ḥāf b. Ḥudayr a,’18 were kings in Syria before the arrival of Ghassān. Sāliḥ collected taxes on whoever settled in their land coming from Muṭar and on any other tribe, on behalf of the Byzantines. Ghassān arrived with a great army, heading for Syria, so as to settle in their territory. Sāliḥ told them: “accept (to pay) tribute, if not we shall fight you.” They refused. Sāliḥ fought and defeated Ghassān. Ghassān’s leader, in those days, was Tha’labā b. ‘Amr b. al-Mujālīd b. ‘Amr b. ‘Adī b. ‘Amr b. Māzin b. al-Azd.19 Ghassān accepted to pay tribute to Sāliḥ who were drawing from them, for every individual, one dinār, one dinār and a half or two dinārs each year, according to their possibilities. Sāliḥ continued to deduct taxes from them as long as God willed, until Jīdh b. ‘Amr the Ghassānite20 killed the Sāliḥ tax collector, who was Sābiṭ b. al-Mundhir b. ‘Amr b. ‘Awf b. Ẓu’b b. Ḥamāta. Sāliḥ called (their men) to arms, just like Ghassān. They met in a place called al-Maḥfī, where Ghassān annihilated them. The king of the Romans feared that Ghassān would ally with Persia against him. He sent a messenger who said to Tha’labā: “You are a people distinguished by your power and by your number. You have massacred this tribe despite the fact it was the strongest and the most numerous of the Arabs. As for me, I settle you in their place and conclude between me and you a pact: if an army constituted of Arabs attacks you, I will support you with forty thousand already equipped Roman warriors. If an army made up of Arabs attacks us, you will have to provide twenty thousand warriors. The condition is that you do not enter in a war between us and Persia. Tha’labā accepted this. (The Emperor) wrote the treaty between them, made Tha’labā king and crowned him. The

17 The title lmlk, ‘the king’, probably refers to the anthroponym which immediately precedes it and not to the group ‘anthroponym + patronym’. Moreover, no pre-Islamic king named ‘Adī is known.

18 According to Ibn al-Kalbī, the genealogy of Ẓu’b is ‘Ḥamāta (Ḍajā’im) b. Sa’d b. ‘Amr (Sāliḥ) b. Ḥulwān b. ‘Imrān b. al-Ḥāf b. Ḥudayr a’ (Caskel 1966, I: tables 279 and 326). M. Lecker has pointed out to me that one can also find the vocalisation Ḏajā’im.


20 According to Ibn al-Kalbī, Jīdh b. ‘Amr is Tha’labā’s ‘brother’ (Caskel 1966, I: table 208).
Roman Emperor was called Decius.’ (Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār [n.d.]: 370–372).

This text is also interesting in that it mentions a treaty between Rome and an Arab prince originating from Ghassān, even though Byzantine historians have not recorded such an agreement between these two parties.22

Tha’ laba’s predecessors, the kings descending from Sāliḥ, are known only in the Arab-Islamic tradition. They are therefore not a usable chronological marker. Tha’ laba’s successors, however, are relatively well dated: as we shall see, they are the princes from Jafna, who ruled in Syria from the 520s onwards.

The Roman emperor who concluded the pact with Tha’ laba is called Di iyus, a name which is corrected as Dīqiyūs. This correction is, however, incompatible with what precedes, since the Emperor Decius (or Trajan Decius) ruled very briefly in the mid-third century AD, from 249 to 251, succeeding Philip the Arab.

Tha’ laba, who is linked by Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār to the tribe of Ghassān,23 descends from ‘Amr b. Māzin b. Dir (= al-Azd). He therefore possibly shared the same ancestor as the bani Jafna, but in all likelihood belonged to a parallel branch (Table 2).

In summary, Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār recalls that a Ghassānite named Tha’ laba b. ‘Amr b. Mujālid had ruled the Arabs of Syria before the Al Jafna, who were distant cousins, seized power. A comparable story can be found in al-Ya’qūbi, Ta’rīkh (1379/1960, I: 206–207); there, the Roman emperor is called Nwši, and the place of the decisive battle is called al-Mukhaffaf. These names are variants which show that they are probably mere interpolations.24 Yet, al-Ya’qūbi, Ta’rīkh’s story presents an important difference, since he does not mention Tha’ laba, but only Jafna b. ‘Alīyya b. ‘Amr b. ‘Āmir, who was made king. Ibn Qutayba, al-Maʿārif, in his paragraph on the kings of Syria, relates first of all how al-Azd, after its departure from Yemen under the leadership of ‘Amr b. ‘Āmir Muzayyiqiyā (sic), settled with the tribe of ‘Akk (on the Red Sea coast in the northern part of Yemen). When he died, his son Tha’ laba succeeded him. Yet this Tha’ laba did not go beyond Mecca. Those who reached Syria were the ‘Al Jafna’ (Ibn Qutayba, al-Maʿārif 1379/1960: 640–644).

The contradictions that one can glean by reading these authors could cast doubt on the historicity of the Tha’ laba mentioned by Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār. Fortunately, several other sources confirm that there was indeed an Arab named Tha’ laba who played an important part, personally or through his descendants, at the very end of the fifth century AD and during the first decades of the sixth.


22 Greatrex, forthcoming. One may ask, however, if the granting of the palm grove by the Jafnid Abikarid did not imply the signing of a treaty: ‘Abocharobas, chief of the Saracens of the place, offered Emperor Justinian a palm grove and the Emperor introduced him as the phylarch of the Saracens of Palestine’ (Procopius, Wars, I.XIX.10).

23 In the sixth century AD, the tribe of Ghassān no longer existed as an autonomous political and social entity in the territory which it controlled. It had become ‘fictitious’ (Caskel 1966, II: 273), like Ḥimyar in tenth-century AD Yemen. Only some groups dispersed in the area between Yathrib and Syria then claimed to belong to Ghassān. Usually, however, tribes that became ‘fictitious’, such as Ḥimyar, Ma add or Nizār, left a name in genealogies under the form of an ancestor more or less distant in time. This was not the case for Ghassān, for reasons that have not been clarified. Concerning the ‘fictitious’ character of Ghassān on the eve of Islam, see Robin, forthcoming.

According to the Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, a princely Arab family called 'The House of Tha'labá', allied to the Romans who campaigned in 502 in Upper Mesopotamia, launched a foray against the city of al-Ḥāra in the Lower Euphrates valley, some 400 km from the mouth of this river in the Arab-Persian Gulf:

'The Arabs of the Persians (Ṭayyé da-bêt Ruhúmoye da-metqreyn da-bêt Ta'labá)' are mentioned as participating in the military expedition of a Himyenean king beyond the Euphrates (Ma‘al 2 – Ry 510).

When reading the syntagms the 'Arabs of the Persians' and the 'Arabs of the land of the Romans', one can easily recognise the Saracens of the Persians and those of the Romans, often referred to in Greek sources (Robin 2008: 170). The word bêt, found twice in the text, is difficult to translate precisely because it has various meanings in

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**Table 2. Genealogical tree of “Tha'labá the king” mentioned in the Eilat inscription (after Ibn al-Kalbi).**

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Dux of Kallinikon went out against them and routed them. The Arabs of the land of the Romans also, who are called those of the House of Tha'labá (Ṭayyé da-bêt Ruhúmoye da-metqreyn da-bêt Ta'labá), went to al-Ḥira (Ḥirāyü da-Nu'mān)... but they did not stay at al-Ḥira because its inhabitants had withdrawn into the inner desert' (Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, Chronicle: LVII.45 and 54).

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25 The Syriac designation ‘Ṭayyé’ derives from the name of the Arab tribe of Tāyy (Sabaic Tāyy) whose centre was probably the modern city of Ḥā'il (Saudi Arabia).
Syrian such as ‘house’, ‘temple’, ‘family’ and even ‘people’ or ‘country’.

A preliminary analysis would reinforce the belief that, in this text the expression ‘House of Tha’bala’ (Ta’labā) points to the descendants of Tha’labā, which would imply a date later than the period when this prince was militarily active. This is, however, not confirmed. Two other examples of the same expression (bêt, with the name of an Arab prince as complement) show that it can point to Tha’labā and his close relatives, which would imply that Tha’labā was still active in 502.

These two examples can be found in the third section of the Ecclesiastical History of John of Ephesus. A monk travels and reaches the ‘Camp of the House of Ḥarit son of Gabalā’ (l-hirāt da-bêt Ḥarit bar Gabalā, text p. 209, translation p. 156). The context confirms that bêt designates the family of al-Ḥārit, as well as the prince himself. In the Latin translation, E.W. Brooks renders bêt by ‘tribe’ (tribus), which seems excessive since the camp is not that of Ghassān. The second passage mentions ‘those familiar with the House of Mundir son of Ḥarit’ (yade ta-hôn da-bêt Mundir bar Ḥarit, text p. 67, translation p. 48). In the latter, E.W. Brooks translates the word by ‘court’ (aula).

c. THE ḤIMyarite inscription Ma’sal 2 = Ry 510

An inscription discovered in central Arabia at Ma’sal, 200 km west of modern Riyadh, commemorates a military campaign beyond the Euphrates carried out by the Ḥimyarite king Ma’dikarib Ya fur at the beginning of the year AD 521. The army was composed of contingents provided by the Ḥimyarite great communes (= sedentary tribes) and by a few Arab tribes:

‘... He was then in an expedition with his communes Saba’, Ḥimyarüm, Ṭabajātān, Ḥadramawt and the South, with his Arabs Kiddat and Madhlīhi(g)üm and with the banû Tha’labat, Mu’dahar. He was in an expedition | in the mont[n]th of dhu-qayzān six hundred and thirty one’ (Ma’sal 2).25

The date is equivalent to June 521 of the Christian era. The Arabs came from tribes in the south of the peninsula, subjects of Ḥimyar — Kinda (Ṣabaic Kiddat) and Madḥāḥih (Ṣabaic Madḥāḥīg) — and also from Muḍar. The leaders of the Muḍarites were the banû Tha’labat: the fact that they are mentioned implies that Muḍar was not just a simple tributary of Ḥimyar, but an ally.

One can therefore find the name of Muḍar, a large tribal confederation of western Arabia to which belonged, according to Ibn Ḥabib, al-Muṣṭabbār, some of the tribes settled in Syria at the time of the banū Sālīḥ. If one relates this information to the designation Diyār Muḍar given to the area of the Middle Euphrates at the beginning of Islamic times,26 I would be inclined to suggest that the Muḍar of the Ma’sal inscription does not refer to the entire Muḍarite confederation, but only to the tribes which were already established on the margins of the Byzantine Empire.

The inscription would appear to indicate that in 521, this Muḍar of Syria is allied to Ḥimyar (which was at the time a tributary of the Christian kingdom of Aksūm and therefore of Byzantium). The South Arabian formula seems to imply that it is the banū Tha’labat — the offspring or descendants of Tha’labat — who are in power and that Tha’labat himself is dead.

D. THE BYZANTINE CHRONICLE OF THEOPHANES THE CONFESSOR

The last piece is a peculiar expression used by the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes the Confessor to identify an Arab chief named Arethas:

‘Anastasius concluded a treaty with Arethas, the father of Badicharimos and of Ogaros, called (son) of the Thalabanē, and from then on all of Palestine, Arabia and Phoenicia benefitted from tranquility and from peace.’ (Theophanes, Chronography: text 141 and 144; translation 217 and 223).

The treaty would have been concluded in 502. The date is not certain because of errors in Theophanes’ chronol-
ogy, which do not correspond (there is a discrepancy of seven years) to that given in other sources. The Emperor Anastasius ruled between AD 491 and 518.

In this passage and in another, Theophanes mentions three Arab chiefs:

— Ögaros (Arabic Ḥuṣr), son of Arethas (Arabic al-Ḥārith);
— Badicharimos (Arabic Ma’dikarib), son of Arethas, who launches incursions into Palestine, Phoenicia and Syria after the death of his brother Ögaros;
— Gabala (Arabic Jabala).

Two different groups can be distinguished: on the one hand the sons of Arethas, on the other Gabala. Arethas, father of Ögaros and Badicharimos, is identified by either of the two expressions: ‘who is named son of the Talabane’ (Ögaros ho tou Aretha tou tês Thalabarès onomazonou paidos) or he ‘who is called (son) of the Talabane’ (Arethas ho tês Thalabarès legomenos).

It seems that the Byzantine chronicler understood ‘Thalabane’ as the name of the mother. In a polygamous society, it is not rare that the sons of a king are distinguished by the mention of their mother. This is the case today for the sons of ‘Abd al-ʿAziz in Saudi Arabia. As for the sixth century AD, I would mention ‘Amr b. Hind or al-Mundhir b. al-Shaqqal (Robin 2008: 185).

The difficulty lies in the fact that no female Arabic anthroponym could produce the name ‘Thalabane’. On the other hand, ‘Tha laban/Thu luban’, the name of a princely lineage of Najran, fits perfectly well (Robin 2010: 87–90; 2013: 203–205). This identification is unlikely, however, because the dhu-Tha laban/Thu luban do not appear to have been active outside the Najran region.

In the absence of a better solution, the relatively frequent anthroponym ‘Tha laba’ is a good candidate. As early as 1887, T. Nöldke (1887: 6) had suggested that one had to search for an individual named Tha laba or a tribe with this eponym; the Byzantine chronicler or his source might have thought that the name Tha laba was feminine because of the ending –a. Nöldke therefore suggested the Tha laba who was b. ‘Amr b. Jafna, the great-grandfather of al-Ḥārith b. Jabala b. al-Ḥārith b. Tha’ laba. He identified him with the ancestor of the banū Shaṭiba of Yathrib/al-Madina, but if one looks at Ibn al-

Kalbi’s genealogies, published since Nöldke’s scholarly works, this Tha laba would not be their ancestor, but a namesake belonging to a parallel branch.

Two Tha laba of the House of Jafna are therefore known. One of them had a son called ‘al-Ḥārith b. Tha’ laba’, who could be a good candidate for ‘Arethas son of the Talabane’. This identification, however, has to overcome one main difficulty: Theophanes mentions no kin relationship between Gabala and ‘Arethas son of the Talabane’, while al-Ḥārith b. Tha’ laba is Jabala’s father.

Another group named Tha laba can be found in Yathrib/al-Madina: these are the banū Tha laba b. Amir (al-Fityawn), who were Jews. Like Jafna, they descended from ‘Amr Muzayyiqiy (Table 2).

This group, just like Tha laba b. ‘Amr b. Mujālid and Tha laba b. ‘Amr b. Jafna, is linked with Ghassān. All in all, there are five Tha laba in the two branches of Ghassān I have examined (see Table 2). Among these five candidates, the Tha laba b. ‘Amr b. Mujālid (brother of Jidh’) of Ibn Ḥabib, al-Muḥabbar is now the best candidate.

One should, however, mention a detail that would question the historical value of the genealogies used: the two best candidates for the Tha laba of the inscription have the same patronym, ‘Amr’. This often indicates that a historical figure whose genealogical placing was disputed is split into two.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that the names Tha laba, al-Ḥārith and Ḥāritha, which are frequent among the Tha labids and the Jafnids, are actually found in inscriptions on mosaics of the church of Saint Sergius at Nitl, near Mādābah in Jordan. According to M. Piccirillo, one can find the names of ‘Tha laba the phylarchos (son) of Audelas (?)’ (… Thaa[l][f…]laud[….]phularchos) and of ‘Eretha son of al-Areta’ (Ō Eretha uios Alarethou) (Piccirillo 2001: 282), i.e Tha laba [al-Awd[…] (?) and Ḥāritha son of al-Ḥārith. These designations do not correspond to any of the figures whose names or deeds have been recorded by genealogies.29

G. Olinger suggested a completely different identification of ‘Arethas son of the Talabane’. The latter would be the Kindite al-Ḥārith al-Malik (i.e. ‘the King’) b. ‘Amr b. Ḥuṣr, ‘sovereign’ of the tribes of central and eastern Arabia subjected to Himyar. He put forward three arguments. The

29 It is difficult to share Irfan Shahid’s enthusiasm according to which ‘the two Greek inscriptions at Nil are a precious addition to the Ghassanid royal onomasticon’ (2001: 286). That the characters quoted are Jafnids is even less secure, if one is to bear in mind that the same anthroponyms can often be found in different lineages in the same period (Robin 1996: 696–697 and n. 114; 2013: 243).
first is that the mother of al-Ḥārith, who was called Umm lyaš bint ‘Awf b. Muhallim b. Dhuhl b. Shaybān b. Tha’labā, originated from a tribe named Tha’labā, linked to Bakr b. Wā’il in north-eastern Arabia (Olinder 1927: 48 and 52; Caskel 1966, I: tables 141 and 142).

The second argument is based on the names of the sons ‘Arethas son of the Talabanê’, Ṫgaros and Badicharimos. Among the sons of al-Ḥārith al-Malik, one does find a Ḥjur and a Maʾdikarib (Caskel 1966, I: table 238; Olinder 1927: 70–93). This last point, however, is not decisive, due to the great popularity of these names: King Abīkarīb As’ad of Yemen, at the beginning of the fifth century, also had two sons called Ḥjur and Maʾdikarib (Robin 2004: 897).

Gunnar Olinder’s third argument is chronology: al-Ḥārith al-Malik died a few months before April 528, after a very long reign which lasted forty or sixty years according to various authors (Robin, 1433/2012: 75).

This ingenious reconstruction can nowadays be rejected thanks to the information contained in the Ḥīmyarīte inscription, which specifies that the banū Tha’labā were the chiefs of Muḍar. The ‘son of the Thalabanê’ was therefore not a Kendite prince of central Arabia.

In the end, the best explanation one can provide at present for the designation ‘son of the Talabanê’ is still ‘son of Tha’labā’, as already suggested by Nöldeke. Hypothetically, one may suggest that Theophanes mentions the raids of two Arab chiefs (Ḡgaros and Badicharimos) who are the sons of Ḳorethas (al-Ḥārith), himself the son of Tha’labā.

Let us now return to the identification of ‘Tha’labā the king’ of our inscription. Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār recalls a tradition related to a king Tha’labā who would have briefly been active on the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire, during a period between the Sallḥids and the Jafnids. Like the Jafnids, this Tha’labā would have belonged to Ḳhassān, but to a different genealogical branch. This genealogy is, of course, a later reconstruction (see Robin 2013), but one can deduce from this that Tha’labā was not a Jafnid. He seems to be an excellent candidate for the king mentioned in the inscription.

Syrian, Ḥīmyarīte and Byzantine sources, while speaking of military raids or expeditions, mention a house of Tha’labā who are descendants of Tha’labā or a child of Tha’labā. First, between AD 497 and 502, they are a threat to Byzantium before they appear as allies of Byzantium in AD 502 and of Ḳhīmyar in AD 521.

A link can be established between Tha’labā in Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār and the banū Tha’labā of the AD 521 Ḫīmyarīte expedition: all of them hold authority on tribes originating from Muḍar and settled on the margins of the Byzantine Empire.

To conclude, I suggest that all the mentions of Tha’labā I have presented (in the chronicles of Theophanes and Pseudo-Joshua, the Ḫīmyarīte inscription and the tradition recorded by Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār), either as an anthroponym or as the ancestor or the eponym of a dynasty, refer to one and single figure. We identify this Tha’labā with the one who, in the Eilat inscription, is ‘Adī’s father.

As far as chronology is concerned, one has to take into account not only direct data, but also elements related to the Jafnids who succeeded Tha’labā in Byzantine Syria. Theophanes mentions a Gabala who raids the Diocese of the Orient, apparently before AD 497. It is undoubtedly the same Gabala who is called ‘King of the Assanites (= Ḳhassānitēs)’ in July 524 (see below). Finally, it is this Gabala’s sons who rise to power during the reign of Emperor Justinian (AD 527–565). The first dated mention of the first, al-Ḥārith, is to be found in the Jabal Usays inscription, dated to the years 528–529 (see below). The second son, ‘Abū Karīb, donates the ‘palm grove’ to the Emperor Justinian (527–565) at the inception of his reign (Robin 2008: 180).

Theophanes mentions a certain Arethas, apparently Tha’labā’s son, who launches devastating forays during the years 497–502: the narrative does not imply that Tha’labā had already died. Pseudo-Joshua the Stylist uses the expression ‘of the House of Tha’labā’, which can be used for a living prince. In the AD 521 Ḫīmyarīte inscription, the official character of which can be deduced from the fact that it is very carefully engraved, the reference to the banū Tha’labā — and not to Tha’labā himself — seems to indicate that Tha’labā is dead.

Tha’labā, who is apparently the father of the Arethas mentioned in Theophanes (c.500), was probably dead in AD 521, but one cannot say if he participated or not in the military expeditions of the year 502. I would therefore place Tha’labā in the interval 475–500, without excluding the possibility that his reign continued after 500. Tha’labā’s family may still have been in power in 521 but in 524, it would have been already replaced by the Jafnids. Finally, one cannot dismiss the idea that both families exercised power simultaneously, in their respective domains, at least for some time.

The inscription mentions a son named ‘Adī who can be placed approximately between 500 and 525. It does not seem that this son (if one accepts the proposal that the title ‘al-Malik’ does not apply to him) benefitted from the same position as his father. He was probably not the eldest.
Rather, Tha’laba’s successors would have been first ‘Ara-thas son of the ‘Talabanė’, then subsequently both sons of the latter, Ōgaros and Badicharimos, whom Theophanes places between 497 and 502.

In summary, we have an inscription written by the son of a certain Tha’laba the king, who can be identified thanks to Byzantine and Syriac chronicles, a Ḥimyarite inscription and the Arab-Islamic tradition. This Tha’laba was probably a prince from Ghassān, but he did not belong to the Al Jafna (or Jafnids). He would have been active on the margins of the Byzantine Empire in the last quarter of the fifth century AD, before the reign of the Jafnids Gabala, al-Ḥārith and al-Mundhir in Syria.

A son of Tha’laba named ‘Adī is known from the Eilat inscription and another one, more doubtful, is called al-Ḥārith (Aretas). From 497 onwards his grandsons Ōgaros and Badicharimos (Ḥujr and Maʾdikarib), the sons of Aretas, launched devastating raids against the Byzantine Empire. The first, Ḥujr, died before 502; the second, Maʾdikarib, was probably one of the banū Tha’laba who commanded the allied tribes of the Romans fighting beside the Roman (Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite) and Ḥimyarite armies (Maʿsal 2 = Ry 510), in AD 502 and 521.

The title of king
In the Eilat inscription, the title of king is borne without the mention of countries, territories, cities and tribes over which this ruler had authority. This is not without significance.

An inventory of the kings of Arabia Deserta at the beginning of the Christian era shows that, until the fourth century, the title of king was always determined by a tribal name. The relevant tribes were Tanūkh, Ghassān, Nizār, al-Asd (also Asd and al-Azd; Arabic al-Asd and al-Azd), Khaṣṣātān, Qaḥṭān, Madīḥ or Kiddat (Arabic Kinda).  

After the fourth century AD, a remarkable change takes place: from then on, apart from rare exceptions, the title of king is used without any indication of tribal affiliation. If indeed a tribe is mentioned, it is not that on which the king exerts authority, but — as far as one can say — that from which he comes.

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30 I have already given the list of tribes in Robin 2008: 182–184. This data is reproduced in Hoyland 2009. For Kinda, see now Robin 1433/2012.
6–9. Sabaean embassy ‘to the kings of the tribes of Ghassan, al-Asd, Nizar\textsuperscript{32} and Madhhig\textsuperscript{32}: (c. AD 255–260).

\textit{mlk ‘s\textsuperscript{2}b\textsuperscript{n} Ġs\textsuperscript{m} w-l\textsuperscript{’}s\textsuperscript{d} w-Nzr\textsuperscript{m} w-Mdhg\textsuperscript{m}}

Like the previous rulers, these kings are mentioned in a dedication written in Sabaeic from Ma’rib in Yemen. See ‘Inān 75 in Bāfaqīl & Robin 1978.

10. ‘Mālik\textsuperscript{32} son of Mu’āwiya\textsuperscript{32} king of Kiddat and of Madhhig\textsuperscript{32}: (end of the third century AD).

\textit{Mlk\textsuperscript{m} bn M\textsuperscript{wyt mlk Kdt w-Mdhg\textsuperscript{m}}}

See MB 2006 I–54, written in Sabaeic, unpublished.\textsuperscript{31} Like the previous rulers, this king is mentioned in a dedication from Ma’rib in Yemen.

11. ‘Gadhīmat king of Tanūkh’ (end of the third century AD?).

Post-classical Nabataean: \textit{dnh nfsw Fhrw | br Šly rbw Gdymt mlk Tnwḥ}

Grek: \textit{ἐ στέλε υπάτε F | erou Solleou | tropheus Gadi | mathou basilēus | Thanouēnōn}

‘This is the funerary stele of Fhr, son of Shullay, private tutor of Gadhīmat, king of Tanūkh’

Funerary stele found at Umm al-Jimāl (Jordan). See Hackl, Jenni & Schneider 2003: 197–198 (F.038.02).

12. ‘Mālik\textsuperscript{m} son of Ka’b\textsuperscript{m} king of al-Asd’ (c. AD 300–310).

\textit{Mlk\textsuperscript{m} bn K\textsuperscript{f} b\textsuperscript{m} mlk-l\textsuperscript{’}s\textsuperscript{d}}

See Sharaf 31/8–10 in Müller 1974. This king is mentioned in a dedication written in Sabaeic from Ma’rib in Yemen.


\textit{bl dkyr nṣyb Hṛtt br Ŷddmnwtw mlk ‘sn}

‘Surely, in remembrance of the very noble Ḥarīthath son of Zaydmanāt king of ‘Assān’.

‘Assān is the Aramaic written form of Ghassān.

This graffito in post-classical Nabataean script and language was discovered at al-Ḳat’a, some 50–70 km south-east of al-’Ulā: see al-Dhuyayb 1426/2005: 65.

14. ‘Imru’ al-Qays son of ‘Amr king of all Arabs’ who became \textit{king of l-ṣryn\textsuperscript{32}} of Nizaru and its kings’, then ‘became \textit{king of Ma addu}\textsuperscript{33} (before AD 328).

\textit{Mr’ l-qys br ‘mrw mlk l-’rb kl-h ... ... w-mlk l-’ṣryn w-Nzrw w-mlhk-hm ... ... w-mlk M’dw...}


15. ‘Malechus Podosacis, phylarch of Assanite Saracens’ (AD 363).

Ammianus Marcellinus mentions the presence of a phylarch whom the Emperor Julian contended with in the Euphrates valley in AD 363.\textsuperscript{34} This figure perhaps bore the title of king, transcribed in Latin by the word \textit{malechus}. ‘Assanite’ is the Aramaic pronunciation of Ghassān.

We do not know if this Malechus Podosacis and his ‘Assanite Saracens’ were established in the Euphrates valley or if they came from western Arabia, requested by the king of Persia.

16. ‘Ḫūr son of ‘Amr, king of Kiddat’ (mid-fifth century AD).

\textsuperscript{31} I would like to thank M. Maraqten warmly for kindly providing me with a copy of this text prior to its publication. On this king, see Robin 1433/2012: 64–69.

\textsuperscript{32} It is difficult to suggest a satisfactory reading and interpretation of this word. The traditional rendering ‘al-Asadayn’, ‘the two Asads’, is unlikely: Asd Shanā’u (from ‘Asir in the south-west of Saudi Arabia) and Asd ‘Umān have never been politically united (as genealogists always do with homonym tribes, they related them to a common ancestor; Robin 2013: 218; Ulrich 2008). Moreover, the statement that Imru’ al-Qays would have been king of Asd Shanā‘u is doubtful, because a king of al-Asd is known at the same period (see above no. 12). The reading that I have put forward, ‘the two Syrias’, makes sense but does not have good parallels.

\textsuperscript{33} Nizaru and Ma addu reflect Nabataean orthography: they are the equivalent of Nizar\textsuperscript{m} and Ma add\textsuperscript{m} in Sabaeic and to Nizar and Ma add in Arabic.

\textsuperscript{34} Ammianus Marcellinus, \textit{History XII} 2.4: ... Surena ... et Malechus Podosacis nomine, phylarchus Saracenorun Assanitarum, famosi nominis latro, omni sacetia per nostros limites diu grassatus ... This king has already been mentioned in n. 27.
Hgr bn 'mrʾ mlk Kdt
Graffito written in Sabaic, carved not far from the wells of al-Ḥimā (in the territory of Kindat and Madḥḥig), about 100 km north-east of Najrān (Saudi Arabia). Kindat is the Sabaic writing of Arabic Kinda.

See Gajda 1996; Robin 1433/2012: 70–72.

The last king sheds light on the situation. He belongs to a family which has long ruled over the tribe of Kinda or which considered itself the heir of previous dynasties. Yet Kinda was integrated into the Himyarite empire when king Mālik son of Muʾāwiya submitted, towards the end of the third century AD. One can therefore surmise that Ḥujr did not officially bear the title of ‘king’ and was not recognised as such by his overlord, but that he used this title when dealing with the internal affairs of his tribe.

B. KINGS WITHOUT A SPECIFIC TITLE

‘Tha’lab the king’ is the fifth ruler of Arabia designated simply as ‘king’, without any mention of a tribe or territory. The four others are:

1. Ṭāmlīk, the King (probably AD 455–456).
A post-classical Nabataean inscription from Umm Jadhāyidh speaks of:

‘Ṭāmlīk the King’.
See al-Dhuwayb 2002: no. 109; see also Nehmé 2010: 7–77.

Umm Jadhāyidh lies some 150 km north-west of Madāʾ in Ṣāliḥ, in the north-west of Saudi Arabia.

2. al-Ḥārith the King (Usays) (AD 528–529).
The author of the oldest dated inscription in the Arabic script and language informs us that:

‘rsl-ny l-Hṛt l-mlk lyy ʾys
Has sent me al-Ḥārith the King to Usays’.
See Macdonald 2010c.

Scholars usually identify l-Hṛt with the Jafnid ruler al-Ḥārith b. Jabala. An identification with the Kindite king mentioned below is less likely but not impossible.

3. al-Ḥārith the King (central Arabia).
In the Arab-Islamic tradition, the third Kindite king of Central Arabia (al-Ḥārith son of Ṭāmlīk), nicknamed ‘the King’ (see Olinder 1927: 66 and passim. As mentioned above, he was killed a few months before April 528.

4. King Abūkarib.
The colophon of a Syriac manuscript is dated ‘in the days of the holy and devout bishops, Mar Jacob and Mar Theodore, so that by their prayers Our Lord might show his compassion to king Abokarib (mlk ḏbwkryb) and to all their Christian brothers’. This king has been identified with the Jafnid ruler Abīkarib son of Jabala (see Robin 2008: n. 94, p. 180).

One should also refer to Byzantine authors who wrote in Greek or Syriac and who did not know which title should be given to the Naṣrīd kings of al-Hira and to the Jafnid ones in Syria. Procopius uses vague circumlocations such as ‘Alamoundaros only had authority over all the Saracens of Persia’ or ‘Arethas son of Gabala, who exercised authority over the Saracens of Arabia’ ( Wars, I.XVII.45 and 47). But he also happens to use the title of king: see for instance ‘king of the Saracens’ (Procopius, Wars, I.XVII.30) or ‘Alamoundaros only had authority over all of the Saracens of Persia, with the dignity of king …’ (ibid. I.XVII.45).

The most ancient Arab-Islamic authors also perceived the difficulty. Ibn Ḥabib, al-Muḥabbab does not write ‘kings of Ghassān’, but ‘the kingship of Ghassān’ (see Ibn Ḥabib, al-Muḥabbab [n.d.]: 370, ‘Cause of the kingship of Ghassān’, sabab mlk Ghassān). In this way, he suggests that the dignity of king has been bestowed on princes originating from Ghassān, but not ruling over it. The same could be said of Ibn al-Kalbi, who avoids using the title ‘king of Ghassān’ (Caskel 1966: 433–434; 419 [Abū Jubayla the Ghassānite king]), except once (ibid.: 673, al-Mundhir king of Ghassān [al-Mundhir; malik Ghassān]) (Robin, forthcoming).

C. KINGS MENTIONED WITH A MORE OR LESS PRECISE INDICATION OF THEIR PLACE OF RESIDENCE

It is not rare that instead of a royal title one finds a reference to a place of residence. This practice is restricted to manuscripts that are more informative than the inscriptions. It is no doubt the result of the existence of numerous

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homonyms: in order to distinguish princes with identical names, one says where they are.

1. ‘Mundir king of Ḥirta’.


2. ‘Mundir son of Zaqiqa king of Ḥirta’-dū-Nuʾmân’.

See Moberg 1924: 5a/12.

3. The ‘Kings of al-Ḥira’.


4. ‘The Kings of Syria’.


5. ‘The kings of Taymā’.


D. KINGS IDENTIFIED BY THE MENTION OF THEIR TRIBE OF ORIGIN

In a more exceptional way, kings have been identified — or so it appears — by the mention of their tribe of origin.

1. ‘ʿAmr, king of the Lakhmites’ (end of third century AD). According to a bilingual Sasanian inscription, written in both Parthian and Pahlavi, discovered at Paikuli (Kurdistan) and written some time after AD 293, the ruler Narseh 1st (AD 293–302) mentions among his supporters a certain ‘ʿAmr king of Lahmây [= Lakhm]’ (Tardieu 1992: Amarō p-[ro n-n-sēre n-L]ahim; de Blois 1995), who welcomes brothers who have placed themselves under his protection.

It seems that the tribe of Lakhm, narrowly associated with Judham and ʿĀmil, was settled in southern Syria. The Sasanian ruler certainly did not get the support of an Arab chief from Roman territory, but of a prince from the Euphrates valley. One can therefore surmise that ‘ʿAmr, king of the Lakhmites’ was a ruler of al-Ḥira, probably of the royal family of Lakhm.

2. ‘Gabala, king of the ‘Assanites’ (AD 524).


This could be an indication of a later reworking of the text, dating from the period when Arab-Muslim authors were beginning to use the expression ‘kings of Ghassân’ instead of ‘kings of Syria’ (originating from Ghassân).

Al-Jābiya lies on a plateau of the Jawlān, in the south-west of present-day Syria (Robin 2008: 178).

In this example, one is not dealing with a king of the tribe of Ghassân, as in the aforementioned inscription (al-Duyayb 1426/2005: no. 65), but with a prince in the service of Byzantium who has authority on a certain number of Arab groups settled in Byzantine territory and not on Ghassân (which has disappeared).

3. The ‘kings of Kinda’

For the Kindite kings of central Arabia, the Arab-Islamic tradition regularly uses the expression ‘kings of Kinda’, mulūk Kinda (Ibn Habīb, al-Muḥabbār [n.d.]: 368).

In this case, one is dealing with rulers originating from the tribe of Kinda in Yemen, to whom the Ḥimyarite

37 This explicit mentions the year 830 of the Seleucid era, but a correction has been introduced: 83[5], with the hypothesis of a scribal omission of the number ‘five’, because the other elements of the same file mention on several occasions the year 835 (Beaucamp, Briquel-Chatonnet & Robin 1999–2000: 42–43).


kings have bestowed power over the confederation of Ma‘add in central Arabia. It is possible, however, that they held this responsibility simultaneously with the dignity of king over their tribe of origin: the above-mentioned graffito with the name of Ḥuǧr, found on the territory of Madhḫij, a tributary of Kinda, gives credit to this idea (Robin 1433/2012: 70–77).

E. ‘IMRŪ’ AL-QAYS SON OF ‘AMR KING OF ALL ARABS’ (BEFORE AD 328)
A specific case is offered by Imrū’ al-Qays son of ʿAmr, apparently a king of al-Hira, initially at the service of the Persians, then of the Romans, who called himself ‘king of all Arabs’ and who claimed the subjection of ʾl-ṣryn and of Nizār, then of Ma‘add, all referred to above.  
Mr ‘l-qys br ‘mrw mlk ‘l-‘rb kl-h  
The list of Arab pre-Islamic kings would be much longer if one quoted all the figures to whom this title was given in the Arab-Islamic tradition. One would for instance add to it the banū Salih, who would have preceded Tha‘labā in Syria (see Ibn Ḥabīb’s quoted text, above), the kings of Sulaym (Lecker 1989: 219–220) or ʿAmr b. al-ʾIthābā al-Khazrajī (end of the sixth century), who wanted to be the ‘king’ of Yathrib (Kister 1968: 147; see other examples in Robin 1433/2012: 83–88). This was not useful in this paper, however.  

It appears that from the fourth century onwards, the kings ruling over a particular tribe disappeared. The first cause was apparently the direct intervention of neighbouring empires (Rome, Persia and Himyar) in the affairs of Arabia Deserta. The setting up of Ḥimyarite suzerainty over Kinda-and-Madhḩij at the end of the third century AD is the first expression of this evolution. The inscriptions of al-Namārah and ʿAbadān provide other examples of this. From the fourth century onwards, kings were replaced by Arab chiefs in the service of Persian, Ḥimyarite and Byzantine rulers. These Arab chiefs had authority over territories or tribal groups, which no longer corresponded to the old tribes. This was probably the main reason for the radical remodelling of the tribal map, which can be observed: tribes (such as Ghassân) broke up and new groups appeared.  

Some of the tribal chiefs allied to empires were distinguished by an honorific title either to reinforce their authority or to reward them for their loyal services. ‘King’ was one of these honorific titles. The best example is given by the Jafnid Arethas, on whom Justinian bestowed ‘royal dignity’ in 529. It is clear that this king did not rule over a clearly defined territory, with a capital, armed forces at his command, a financial administration, etc. As for the kings of Persia, they granted the right to wear the diadem over a turban or hairdo (hence the designation dhū ‘l-tāj, ‘bearer of the diadem’).  

Only some Arab princes were honoured in this way. For the majority of others, imperial authorities were content to recognise only the title of ‘tribal chief’ (phylarchos). One cannot exclude the fact that some princes bestowed upon themselves the title of king by pure vanity or in order to assert their authority, even though this title was not granted to them or recognised by a higher authority. Others, who were not kings, were described in this way by their descendants in order to add to the family’s or tribe’s prestige.  
The princes who entered in the service of Byzantium have been divided by G. Greatrex (forthcoming) into several categories: some (such as the Arabs) remained at the head of their tribe outside the empire; others migrated with all their weapons and possessions into Roman territory; some, finally, are known to have integrated Roman hierarchy and to have cut the links with their original background.  

Turning once more to Tha‘labā, one can suggest that he was not an Arab king ruling over a particular stretch of territory. Rather, he was a tribal chief who placed himself in the service of Byzantium from which he received subsidies in order to ensure the protection of the empire and provide it with troops: this is what can be deduced from the treaty mentioned by Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥābabbar.  

How Tha‘labā obtained the title of ‘king’ is unknown. It was probably conceded or recognised by Byzantium, but again this is not certain. Our text is a simple graffito carved in a distant place, far from all control of any authority, even if it is near a major road. It does not necessarily reflect an official point of view, as opposed to the beautiful inscriptions exposed to the gaze of all in regularly visited locations.

39 Lecker 2003: 57–65 (‘The Diadem’). Procopius, Wars, I.XVII.26–27, emphasises the importance vested by this distinction: ‘[the king] took off an ornament that he was in the habit of tying to his hair, made of gold and pearls. This was a great mark of dignity among the Persians, that came in importance straight after royal honours. Since over there, it was forbidden to wear a ring, a belt, a brooch or anything else of gold, except with the king’s permission.’ Concerning these kings, see ʿAthamina 1998.
References


A ROCK INSCRIPTION MENTIONING THAL’ ABA


