

A rock inscription mentioning Tha‘laba, 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.

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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-Maghribī, the former connecting the Red Sea with the Mediterranean, the latter connecting North Africa and Egypt with Mecca, via Ayla (‘Aqaba).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. Nehmé, who read the complete text:

’nh ’dyw b{r}

t’lbh ’l-mlk

‘I am ‘Adiyū son of

Ta‘labah 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 Nehmé) and remarks on the historical background of the text (by Robin).⁵

Palaeographic and grammatical discussion (L. Nehmé)

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

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 ‘Aqabat 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,⁶ were set out in a recently published article.⁷ 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 ‘calligraphic’ Nabataean; the *d*, the only particularity of which is the dot over it, a feature which is found both in Nabataean texts and in transitional ones (see a provisional list of dotted *d* in Nehmé 2010: 55–59); and the *l*, which does not have the loop one finds in a large number of Nabataean texts but is a simple vertical stroke ligatured to the left through a small horizontal line. This form is, however, already found in first-century AD texts from Madā’in Šāliḥ.⁸

In transitional inscriptions, the loop of the Nabataean *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 *ʿ*. At the end of the development, the short vertical stem disappears and only a diagonal stroke, the ancestor of the Arabic straight *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

inscription from Umm Jadhāyidh in north-west Arabia, UJadh 4 (Fig. 6).⁹

There are two examples of *b* in the inscription, in *br* and in *tʿlbh*. The first one would be at home in a ‘calligraphic’ Nabataean text, whereas the second one leans backwards and has therefore almost exactly the same shape as the *n* in *ʿnh*. In Arabic, the *b* and the *n* are, of course, homomorphs but vertical.

There are two examples of *h* in the text, both in final position, in *ʿnh* and in *tʿlbh*. 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 uninterrupted 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 *ʿ* in *ʿdyw* and in *tʿlbh*. The main characteristics of the transitional *ʿ* is that it progressively sits on the line, as opposed to most examples of Nabataean *ʿ*, 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 *tʿlbh*, the *ʿ* 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 *ʿwydw* and *šlymw*), which shows very well the development of the letter’s form.

The *m* and the final *k* occur once each in *ʿl-mlk*. 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

⁶ See Macdonald 2009: 217: ‘the “Arabic script”, in all its forms, simply represents the later phases of the Nabataean script, i.e. in terms of graphic development there are not two scripts — Nabataean and Arabic — but simply one script, developing over centuries and used first to write the Aramaic language, then sometimes Aramaic sometimes Arabic, then Arabic’.

⁷ Nehmé 2010. This author is also preparing, as part of a Habilitation’s thesis, a commented edition of all the texts in transitional characters recorded during the Darb al-Bakra Archaeological and Epigraphic Survey in north-west Arabia, undertaken under the direction of A. al-Ghabban.

⁸ See examples in the tables published in Healey 1993: 292–297, for instance in JSNab 2, 8, 30, etc.

⁹ This inscription, and most of those used here as examples, are part of the Darb al-Bakra corpus, the publication of which is in preparation in Riyadh, the Nabataean inscriptions being the responsibility of the author.

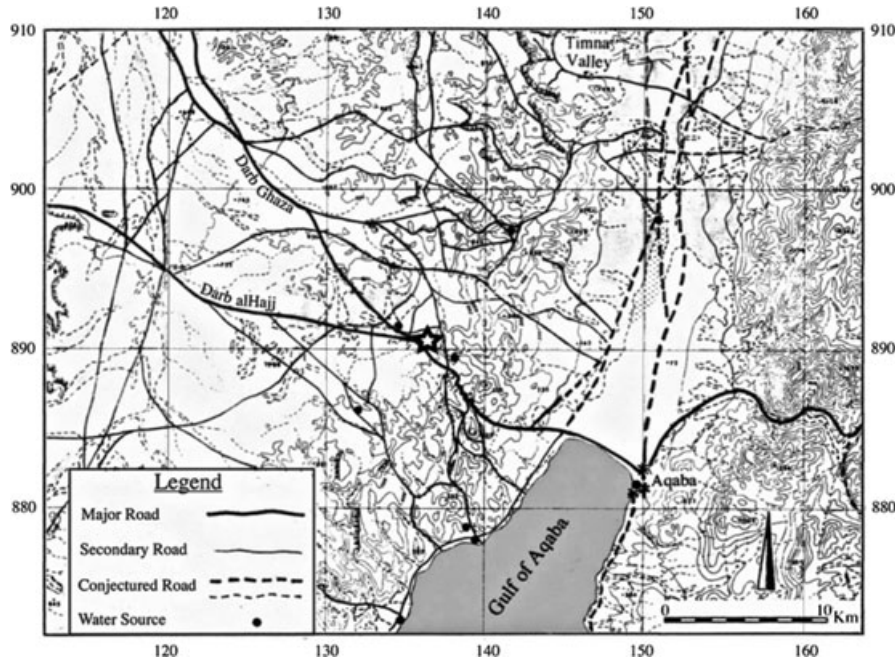


Fig. 1.

A road map of the head of the Gulf of 'Aqaba, indicating the find spot of the inscription.

and to the left between the bottom of the letter and half-way up it.¹⁰ The form of *'l-mlk* in this text should be compared to that of *'l-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*, *šlm* and *bṭb*, may be a 'linguistic fossil' used as an ideogram and would therefore not inform us on the language the author spoke.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 *ṭ*. 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

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.

¹¹ Macdonald 2010b: 20. He recalls that *br* is used instead of *bn* in the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions of Namārah, 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).



Fig. 2.
The boulder bearing the inscription (1) and the remains of the ancient road behind it (2).



Fig. 3.
The inscription, with the carving of an ibex and a dog.

the papyri. A very telling parallel can be found in a text from al-Mābiyāt (al-Muraykhi, in press), dated AD 280, where the difference in size between the *y* 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

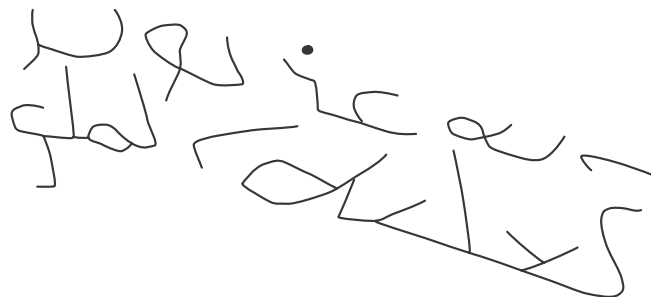


Fig. 4.
A facsimile of the inscription.



Fig. 5.
ARNA.Nab 17 (Macdonald 2009): *ʿy dkyr ʿwydw* (l. 3) *br šlymw* (l. 4) *khnʿ* (l. 5) *dnh šnt mʿh* (l. 2) *w šbʿyn* (l. 1).

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; Nehmé 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 Thaʿlaba 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,



Fig. 6.
UJadh 4: *bl{y} dkyr br 'byw 'šhp}*.

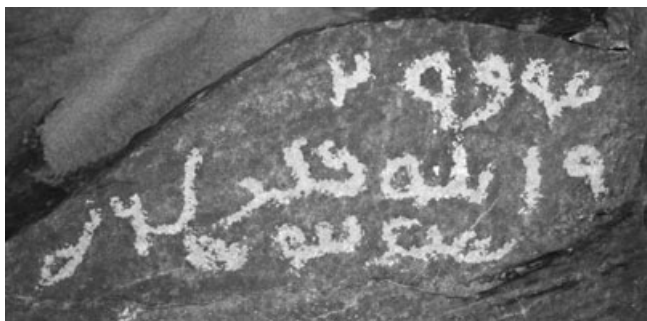


Fig. 7.
UJadh 297: *'wpw br w' {y}lw ktb ydh šnt 2x100 [AD 305–306]*.



Fig. 8.
UJadh 298: *ṯ'lbh br 'lḥrt šlm*.

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.



Fig. 9.
Ar 19: *dkyr gr'm br 'mrw*.

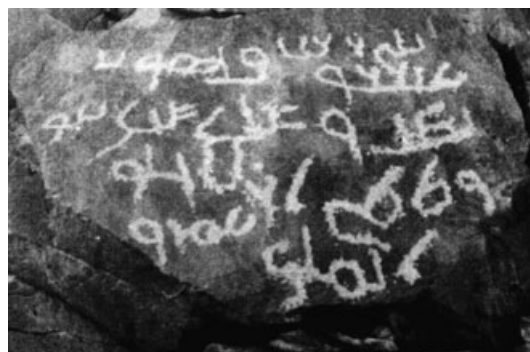


Fig. 10.
UJadh 109 (photograph S. al-Theeb): *bly dkyr phmw br 'bydw šlm šnt 2x100 + 100 + 20 + 20 + 10 [AD 455–456] 'dḥlw 'mrw 'l-mlk*.



Fig. 11.
UJadh 367: *ḥbšh br 'bd'l'šhn br 'bd'l'šhn*.



Fig. 12.
Text from Mābiyāt (photograph M. al-Muraykhi): *--- šlm 'l q[b]r r{mn}h 'ntth brt ywsp br 'rr dy mn qry' dy mytt ywm 'šryn w šth b'yr šnt m'h w šb'yn w ḥmš*.



Fig. 13.

Text from Sakākā (photograph Kh. al-Muaikil): *dkyrw mhrbw w 'šhbh 'l 'šrh w 'nymw w [w]'lw w hrtw w {b/n}tšw btbw mhrbw br 'wyd'lt ktb ydh ywm 'šrh w tmnh b'yr šnt 2x100+100+20+3 [AD 428] 'd{hg}---- [crack] {b/n}{ }'l-hyrh.*

Table 1. Table showing the main differences between the letter forms of the Jabal Usays and those of the Eilat inscription.

Jabal Usays	Ṭa'labah text	
'	completely straight	still transitional
w	bending to the left	relatively straight
k	on the line	coming down below the line
'	triangular form open at the top	upper part of the letter rounded

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 Taymā' 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 'anah, which is normal in Aramaic documents.¹² It is not surprising that it is used much more widely in the private documents written on papyrus than 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 'anā but it is written 'nh in the first line of the Old Arabic inscription from Jabal Usays, dated AD 528–529:¹³ 'nh rqym br m'rf

'l- 'wsy, 'I, Ruqaym son of Mu'arrif the Awsite'. P. Larcher, who commented on the use of this form after it was recognised by C. Robin and M. Gorea (2002: 508), recalls that 'anā and 'anah are regarded by Arab grammarians as the two *pausal* forms of the pronoun (Larcher 2010: 105, quoting Arab grammarians).

The only clear Arabism, apart from the name Tha'labah itself, is the definite article. The occurrence of the Arabic article 'l 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?¹⁴ 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 'dhlw, which probably means 'they introduced',¹⁵ 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' (Ḥegrā) in several inscriptions,¹⁶ may suggest that the name of the city was Arabicised or Aramaeised, 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 'dyw, 'Adiyū, is attested in the Nabataean inscriptions, most recently in two graffiti discovered in the

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 Ḥarrān inscription, which is a little later than 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 'd glw '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 'lhgrw of JSNab 17.

region of al-'Ulā (al-Theeb 2011: nos. 6 and 9). It occurs also in an inscription from the Jabal Ithlib, MSNab 45/2, where 'dyw is the father of a man who bears the Jewish name šm'wn (Hoyland 2011: no. 16). As for the name *t'lbh*, it is not previously known in the Nabataean corpus and it is clearly the Arabic name Tha'laba (see below). Note that in this text, it is written with a final *h*, which is an indication that in the dialect of Arabic used by the writer, the feminine ending was *-ah* in pause, as in Classical Arabic orthography before the invention of the *tā'* *marbūṭah*.

A new mention of an Arab king from Ghassān (C. Robin)

A likely identification of T'lbh

If one looks for 'Adī son of Tha'laba' 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 Tanūkh, i.e. a tribe of the Lower Euphrates (Caskel 1966, I: tables 162 and 298). Neither of these two 'Adī is a satisfactory candidate for the author of our text. The search for a 'king' named Tha'laba is fortunately more productive.¹⁷ Arab sources, but also Ḥimyarite, 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'laba on the southern margins of the *bilād al-Shām*. The most significant text is that of the Arab historian Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbar (d. in AD 860/AH 245), who recalls in detailed form this king's rise to power, after the descendants of Salīḥ (tribe of Quḍā'a) 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 Ḍuj'um b. Ḥamāṭa b. Sa'd b. Salīḥ b. 'Amr b. al-Ḥāf b. Quḍā'a,¹⁸ were kings in Syria before the arrival of Ghassān. Salīḥ collected taxes on whoever settled in their land coming from Muḍar 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. Salīḥ told them: "accept (to pay) tribute, if not we shall fight you." They refused. Salīḥ fought and defeated Ghassān. Ghassān's leader, in those days, was Tha'laba b. 'Amr b. al-Mujālid b. 'Amr b. 'Adī b. 'Amr b. Māzin b. al-Azd.¹⁹ Ghassān accepted to pay tribute to Salīḥ who were drawing from them, for every individual, one dinār, one dinār and a half or two dinārs each year, according to their possibilities. Salīḥ continued to deduct taxes from them as long as God willed, until Jidh' b. 'Amr the Ghassānite²⁰ killed the Salīḥ tax collector, who was Sabīṭ b. al-Mundhir b. 'Amr b. 'Awf b. Ḍuj'um b. Ḥamāṭa. Salīḥ called (their men) to arms, just like Ghassān. They met in a place called al-Mḥff, 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'laba: "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'laba accepted this. (The Emperor) wrote the treaty between them, made Tha'laba king and crowned him. The

¹⁷ The title *'l-mlk*, '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 Ḍuj'um is 'Ḥamāṭa (*Ḍuj'um*) b. Sa'd b. 'Amr (*Salīḥ*) b. Ḥulwān b. 'Imrān b. al-Ḥāfī b. Quḍā'a' (Caskel 1966, I: tables 279 and 326). M. Lecker has pointed out to me that one can also find the vocalisation *Daj'am*.

¹⁹ In Caskel 1966, I: table 208, Tha'laba's genealogy is 'Tha'laba b. 'Amr b. al-Mujālid b. al-Ḥārith b. 'Amr b. 'Adī b. 'Amr b. Māzin b. al-Azd'.

²⁰ According to Ibn al-Kalbī, Jidh' b. 'Amr is Tha'laba's 'brother' (Caskel 1966, I: table 208).

Roman Emperor was called Decius.’ (Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbar [n.d.]: 370–372).²¹

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 Salīh, 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‘iyūs*, a name which is corrected as

²¹ I thank M. Lecker, who has kindly revised my translation. It is not superfluous to present the Arab text below, which shows some difficulties: *Kāna sabab mulk Ghassān ma‘a ‘l-Rūm anna al-Dajā‘im wa-hum banū Ḍuj‘um b. Ḥamāta b. Sa‘d b. Salīh b. ‘Amr b. al-Ḥāf b. Quḍā‘a, wa-kānū mulūk bi-‘l-Shām qabl quḍūm Ghassān. Wa-kānat Salīh yajbūna man nazala bi-sāḥati-him min Muḍar wa-ghayri-hā li-l-Rūm. Fa-aqbalat Ghassān fī jam‘ ‘azīm yurīdūna ‘l-Shām ḥattā nazalū bi-him. Fa-qālat Salīh la-hum: ‘In aqrartum bi-‘l-kharj wa-illā qātalnā-kum’. Fa-abaw ‘alay-him, fa-qālatat-hum Salīh, fa-hazamū Ghassān. Wa-ra‘īs Ghassān yawma ‘idhⁱⁿ Tha‘laba b. ‘Amr b. al-Mujālid b. ‘Amr b. ‘Adī b. ‘Amr b. Māzin b. al-Azd. Fa-raḍiyat Ghassān bi-adā‘ al-kharj ilay-him fa-kānū yajbūna-hum li-kull ra‘s dīnār^{an}, wa-dīnār^{an} wa-niṣf^{an}, wa-dīnārāy fī kull sana ‘alā aqdāri-him. Fa-labithū yajbūna-hum mā shā‘a ‘llāh ḥattā qatala Jidh‘ b. ‘Amr al-Ghassānī jābiya Salīh wa-huwa Sabūṭ b. al-Mundhir b. ‘Amr b. ‘Awf b. Ḍuj‘um b. Ḥamāta. Fa-tanādat Salīh bi-shi‘āri-hā wa-tanādat Ghassān bi-shi‘āri-hā. Fa-‘ltaqaw bi-mawḍi‘ yuqālu la-hu al-Mḥff fa-abārat-hum Ghassān wa-khāfa malik al-Rūm an yamīlū ma‘a Fāris ‘alay-hi. Fa arsala ilā Tha‘laba fa-qāla: ‘Antum qawm la-hu ba‘s shadīd wa-‘adad kabīr’. Wa-qad qataltum hādḥā ‘l-ḥayy wa-kānū ashadd ḥayy fī ‘l-‘Arab wa-akthar-hum ‘udda. Wa-innī jā‘ilu-kum makāna-hum wa-kātib baynī wa-bayna-kum kitāb^{an}: inna dahima-kum dahm min al-‘Arab amdadtu-kum bi-arba‘īna alf muqātil min al-Rūm bi-adāti-him. Wa-inna dahima-nā dahim min al-‘Arab fa-‘alay-kum ‘ishrūna alf muqātil ‘alā an lā tadkḥulū bayna-nā wa-bayna Fāris’. Fa-qabila dhālika Tha‘laba wa-kataba al-kitāb bayna-hum. Fa-mallaka Tha‘laba wa-tawwaja-hu. Wa-kāna malik al-Rūm yuqālu la-hu Dīqiyūs (manuscript: Di‘iyūs). Alfred-Louis de Prémare (2002: 395–396) and Robert Hoyland (2009: 386) quote part of this text in translation.*

²² Greatrex, forthcoming. One may ask, however, if the granting of the palm grove by the Jafnid Abīkarib did not imply the signing of a treaty: ‘Abocharabos, 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).

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-Muḥabbar to the tribe of Ghassān,²³ descends from ‘Amr b. Māzin b. Dir’ (= al-Azd). He therefore possibly shared the same ancestor as the banū Jafna, but in all likelihood belonged to a parallel branch (Table 2).

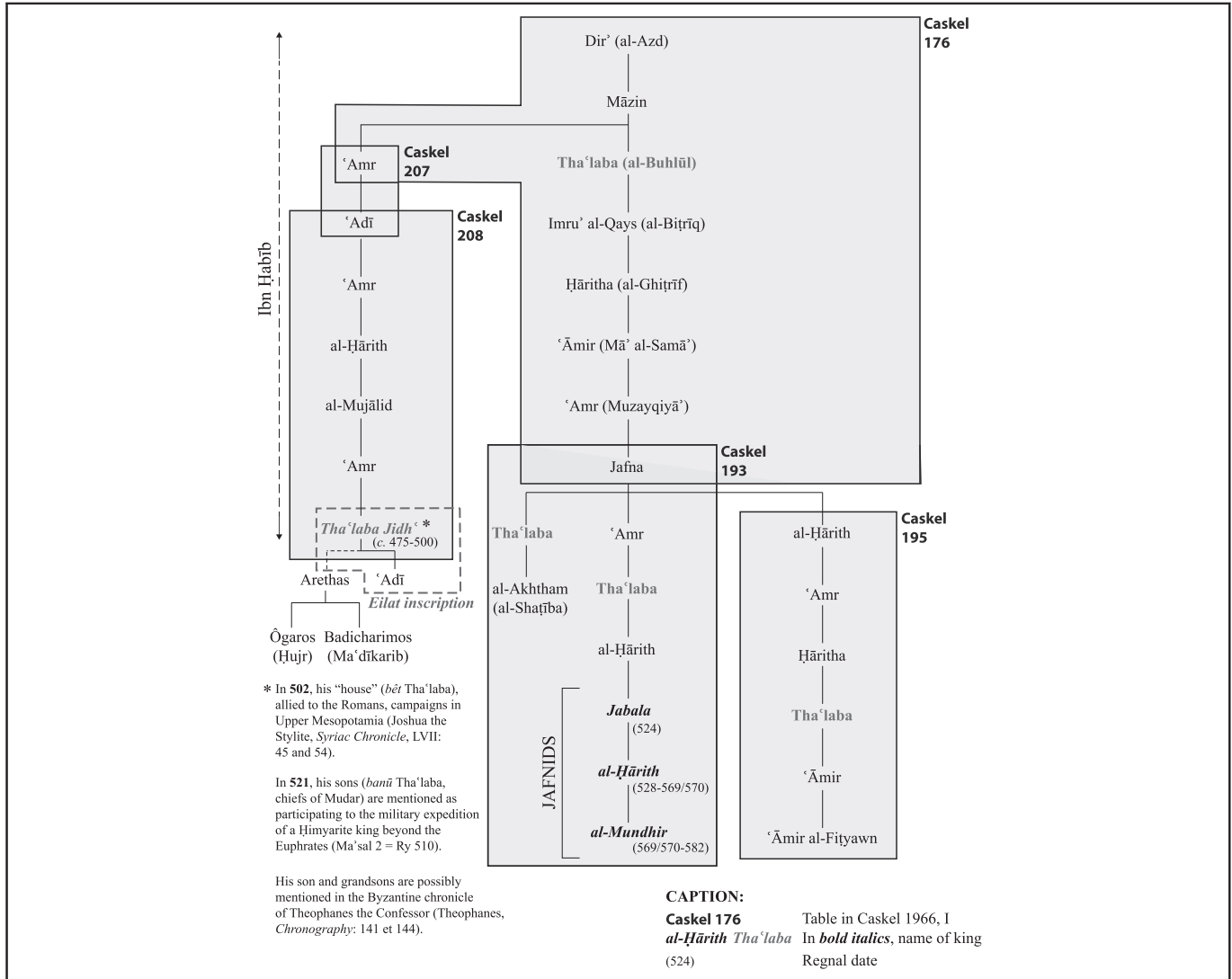
In summary, Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbar recalls that a Ghassānite named Tha‘laba b. ‘Amr b. Mujālid had ruled the Arabs of Syria before the ‘Āl Jafna, who were distant cousins, seized power. A comparable story can be found in al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta‘rīkh* (1379/1960, I: 206–207): there, the Roman emperor is called *Nwšr*, and the place of the decisive battle is called al-Mukḥaffaf. These names are variants which show that they are probably mere interpolations.²⁴ Yet, al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta‘rīkh*’s story presents an important difference, since he does not mention Tha‘laba, but only Jafna b. ‘Aliyya b. ‘Amr b. ‘Āmir, who was made king. Ibn Qutayba, al-Ma‘ārif, 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 Muzayqiyā’ (*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 Meccah. Those who reached Syria were the ‘Āl Jafna’ (Ibn Qutayba, al-Ma‘ārif 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-Muḥabbar. 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.

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.

²⁴ Ḥamza al-Iṣḥānī, *Mulūk al-arḍ* (who died after 961) (1844/1848: 116 and 92), calls the Emperor Nestor, Nisṭūris. *Nwšr* and Nisṭūris could be corruptions of ‘Anastasius’.

Table 2. Genealogical tree of “Tha’laba the king” mentioned in the Eilat inscription (after Ibn al-Kalbī).



B. THE SYRIAC CHRONICLE OF PSEUDO-JOSHUA THE STYLITE
 According to the Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, a princely Arab family called ‘The House of Tha’laba’, allied to the Romans who campaigned in 502 in Upper Mesopotamia, launched a foray against the city of al-Ḥīra in the Lower Euphrates valley, some 400 km from the mouth of this river in the Arab-Persian Gulf:

‘The Arabs of the Persians (*Ṭayayê dā-Pūrsoyê*)²⁵ advanced as far as al-Khābūr river and Timostrates the

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’laba (*Ṭayayê dā-bêt Rāhūmoyê dā-metqareyn dā-bêt Ta’labā*), went to al-Ḥīra (*Ḥīrā’ dā-Nu’ mān*)... but they did not stay at al-Ḥīra because its inhabitants had withdrawn into the inner desert’ (Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle*: LVII.45 and 54).

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

²⁵ The Syriac designation ‘Ṭayayê’ derives from the name of the Arab tribe of Ṭayyi’ (Sabaic *Ṭy^m*) whose centre was probably the modern city of Ḥā’il (Saudi Arabia).

Syriac 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‘laba*) points to the descendants of Tha‘laba, 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‘laba and his close relatives, which would imply that Tha‘laba 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 Ḥarīt son of Gabalâ’ (*l-ḥirtâ dâ-bêt Ḥarīt bar Gabalâ*, text p. 209, translation p. 156). The context confirms that *bêt* designates the family of al-Ḥārith, 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 Mundīr son of Ḥarīt’ (*yade‘tâ-hôn dâ-bêt Mundīr bar Harit*, 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‘dīkarīb 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’, Ḥimyar^{um}, Raḥba|tān, Ḥaḍramawt and the South, with his Arabs Kiddat and Madhḥi|g^{um} and with the banū Tha‘labat, Mu(ḍa)r. He was in an expedition | [in the mon]nth of dhu-qay[zā]n six hundred and thirty one’ (Ma‘sal 2).²⁶

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 (Sabaic Kiddat) and Madhḥij (Sabaic Madhḥig^{um}) — and also from Muḍar. The leaders of the Muḍarites were the banū Tha‘laba: 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 Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbar, some of the tribes settled in Syria at the time of the banū Saīf. If one relates this information to the designation Diyār Muḍar given to the area of the Middle Euphrates at the beginning of Islamic times,²⁷ 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 Ōgaros, called (son) of the Thalabanê, 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-

²⁶ Ma‘sal 2 = Ry 510 / 6–9: *w-s‘b‘w b-‘s‘b-hmw S‘b‘w-Ḥmyr^m w-Rḥb⁷lⁿ w-Ḥ(d)rmt w-Y(m)n w-b-‘m ‘rb-hmw Kdt w-Md⁸h[g]^m w-b-‘m bny T‘lbt w-Mḍr-w-S^l(b‘)w. (h) w-⁹ b-wrḥⁿ d-qy[z]ⁿ d-l-‘hd-w-ḥty-w-s‘l m‘lⁿ.*

²⁷ Canard 1965; Heidemann 2011. The Jazīra, since the early days of Islam, was populated by numerous tribal groups originating from Arabia, groups which gave their names to this land: it was divided into Diyār Muḍar to the west (approximately the Euphrates valley, nowadays in Syrian territory), Diyār Bakr to the north and Diyār Rabī‘a to the east. If Muḍar was a great confederation of western Arabia, Bakr and Rabī‘a were tribes of eastern Arabia. The hypothesis according to which Muḍarite groups were to be found in the Euphrates valley even before the formation of Islam agrees with an information given by Ammianus Marcellinus: in AD 363, the Emperor Julian contended on the Euphrates with ‘Malechus, Podosaces by name, phylarch of the Assanitic Saracens, a notorious brigand’ in the service of the Sāsānian Persians. These *Assanitae*, who can be identified with Ghassān (see below), originated from western Arabia.

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:

— Ôgaros (Arabic Ḥujr), son of Arethas (Arabic al-Ḥārith);

— Badicharimos (Arabic Ma'dīkarib), son of Arethas, who launches incursions into Palestine, Phoenicia and Syria after the death of his brother Ôgaros;

— Gabala (Arabic Jabala).

Two different groups can be distinguished: on the one hand the sons of Arethas, on the other Gabala. Arethas, father of Ôgaros and Badicharimos, is identified by either of the two expressions: 'who is named son of the Talabanê' (*Ôgaros ho tou Aretha tou tês Thalabanês onomazomenou paidos*) or he 'who is called (son) of the Thalabanê' (*Arethas ho tês Thalabanês legomenos*).

It seems that the Byzantine chronicler understood 'Thalabanê' 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-'Azīz in Saudi Arabia. As for the sixth century AD, I would mention 'Amr b. Hind or al-Mundhir b. al-Shaqīqa (Robin 2008: 185).

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

In the absence of a better solution, the relatively frequent anthroponym 'Tha'laba' is a good candidate. As early as 1887, T. Nöldeke (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*. Nöldeke 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.²⁸ He identified him with the ancestor of the banū Shaṭība of Yathrib/al-Madīna, but if one looks at Ibn al-

Kalbī's genealogies, published since Nöldeke'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 Talabanê'. This identification, however, has to overcome one main difficulty: Theophanes mentions no kin relationship between Gabala and 'Arethas son of the Talabanê', while al-Ḥārith b. Tha'laba is Jabala's father.

Another group named Tha'laba can be found in Yathrib/al-Madīna: these are the banū Tha'laba b. Āmir (al-Fityawn), who were Jews. Like Jafna, they descended from 'Amr Muzayqiyā' (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 Ḥabīb, 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 Mādabā in Jordan. According to M. Piccirillo, one can find the names of 'Thaalaba the phylarchos (son) of Audelas (?)' (... *Thaa|l[...]|lau|d[...]|phularchos*) and of 'Eretha son of al-Aretha' (*Ô Eretha uios Alarethou*) (Piccirillo 2001: 282), i.e. Tha'laba [a]l-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. Olinder suggested a completely different identification of 'Arethas son of the Talabanê'. The latter would be the Kindite al-Ḥārith al-Malik (i.e. 'the King') b. 'Amr b. Ḥujr, 'sovereign' of the tribes of central and eastern Arabia subjected to Ḥimyar. He put forward three arguments. The

²⁸ Nöldeke based himself on the genealogy transmitted by Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, Mulūk al-arḍ (who wrote in AD 961).

²⁹ It is difficult to share 'Irfan Shahīd's enthusiasm according to which 'the two Greek inscriptions at Nitl 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 Iyās bint ‘Awf b. Muḥallim b. Dhuhl b. Shaybān b. Tha‘laba, originated from a tribe named Tha‘laba, 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’, Ôgaros and Badicharimos. Among the sons of al-Ḥārith al-Malik, one does find a Ḥujr and a Ma’dikarib (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 Abikarib As‘ad of Yemen, at the beginning of the fifth century, also had two sons called Ḥujr and Ma’dikarib (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 Ḥimyarite inscription, which specifies that the banū Tha‘laba were the chiefs of Muḍar. The ‘son of the Thalabanê’ was therefore not a Kindite 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‘laba’, as already suggested by Nöldeke. Hypothetically, one may suggest that Theophanes mentions the raids of two Arab chiefs (Ôgaros and Badicharimos) who are the sons of Arethas (al-Ḥārith), himself the son of Tha‘laba.

Let us now return to the identification of ‘Tha‘laba the king’ of our inscription. Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbar recalls a tradition related to a king Tha‘laba who would have briefly been active on the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire, during a period between the Salīhids and the Jafnids. Like the Jafnids, this Tha‘laba would have belonged to Ghassān, 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‘laba was not a Jafnid. He seems to be an excellent candidate for the king mentioned in the inscription.

Syriac, Ḥimyarite and Byzantine sources, while speaking of military raids or expeditions, mention a house of Tha‘laba who are descendants of Tha‘laba or a child of Tha‘laba. First, between AD 497 and 502, they are a threat to Byzantium before they appear as allies of Byzantium in AD 502 and of Ḥimyar in AD 521.

A link can be established between Tha‘laba in Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbar and the banū Tha‘laba of the AD 521 Ḥimyarite 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‘laba I have presented (in the chronicles of Theophanes and Pseudo-Joshua, the Ḥimyaritic inscription and the tradition recorded by Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbar), either as an anthroponym or as the ancestor or the eponym of a dynasty, refer to one and single figure. We identify this Tha‘laba 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‘laba 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 (= Ghassānites)’ 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 Karib, 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‘laba’s son, who launches devastating forays during the years 497–502: the narrative does not imply that Tha‘laba had already died. Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite uses the expression ‘of the House of Tha‘laba’, which can be used for a living prince. In the AD 521 Ḥimyarite inscription, the official character of which can be deduced from the fact that it is very carefully engraved, the reference to the ‘banū Tha‘laba’ — and not to Tha‘laba himself — seems to indicate that Tha‘laba is dead.

Tha‘laba, 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‘laba in the interval 475–500, without excluding the possibility that his reign continued after 500. Tha‘laba’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'aba's successors would have been first 'Arethas son of the Talabanê', then subsequently both sons of the latter, Ôgaros and Badicharimos, whom Theophanes places between 497 and 502.

In summary, we have an inscription written by the son of a certain Tha'aba the king, who can be identified thanks to Byzantine and Syriac chronicles, a Himyarite inscription and the Arab-Islamic tradition. This Tha'aba was probably a prince from Ghassân, but he did not belong to the Āl 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-Ĥārith and al-Mundhir in Syria.

A son of Tha'aba named 'Adī is known from the Eilat inscription and another one, more doubtful, is called al-Ĥārith (Arethas). From 497 onwards his grandsons Ôgaros and Badicharimos (Ĥujr and Ma'dīkarib), the sons of Arethas, launched devastating raids against the Byzantine Empire. The first, Ĥujr, died before 502; the second, Ma'dīkarib, was probably one of the banū Tha'aba who commanded the allied tribes of the Romans fighting beside the Roman (Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite) and Himyarite armies (Ma'sal 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, Ghassân, Nizār^{um}, al-Asd (also Asd and al-Azd; Arabic al-Asd and al-Azd), Khaṣāṣatān, Qaḥṭān, Madhḥig^{um} or Kiddat (Arabic Kinda).³⁰

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.

A. KINGS WITH A SPECIFIC TITLE

More than ten kings of tribes of *Arabia Deserta* are known so far, and these are listed below in chronological order:

1. 'Mu'āwiyat son of Rabī'at of the lineage of..., the Qaḥṭānite, **king of Qaḥṭān and of Madhḥig**' (second century AD?).

M'wyt bn Rb't d-(l M.t) [q]ḥṭnyⁿ mlk Qḥṭⁿ w-Mdhg

Funerary stele found during the excavations at Qaryat al-Fāw, some 300 km north-north-east of Najrān (Saudi Arabia), inscribed with a text in Sabaic.

See al-Ansary 1981: 144.

2. 'Rabī'at (son of Mu'āwiyat), of the lineage of Thawr^{um}, **king of Kiddat and of Qaḥṭān**' (c. AD 220).

Rb't (bn M'wyt) d-'l Twr^m mlk Kdt w-Qḥṭⁿ

This king is mentioned in two dedications written in Sabaic, deposited in the Awām temple of Ma'rib in Yemen (on this king, see Robin 1433/2012: 62–64). Kiddat is the Sabaic writing of Arabic Kinda.

See Ja 635/26–27 in Jamme 1962: 67–76; see also DAI-Bar'ān 2000–1/9–10 in Nebes 2004.

3. 'Mālik^{um} son of Baddā **king of Kiddat and of Madhḥig^{um}**' (c. AD 230–255).

Mlk^m bn Bd mlk Kdt w-Mdhg^m

Like the previous one, this king is mentioned in a dedication written in Sabaic from Ma'rib in Yemen.

See Ja 2110/8–9 in Doe & Jamme 1968; see also Robin, 1433/2012: 64–69.

He is also mentioned under the form *Mlk^m mlk Kdt*: see Ja 576/2 in Jamme 1962: 67–76.

4. 'Imru' al-Qays son of 'Awf^{um} **king of Khaṣāṣatān**' (c. AD 240).

Mr'lqs' bn 'wf^m mlk Ḥṣṣṭⁿ

Like the previous rulers, this king is mentioned in a dedication written in Sabaic from Ma'rib in Yemen.

See Ja 576/2 in Jamme 1962: 67–76.

5. 'al-Ĥārith son of Ka'b^{um} **king of Asad**' (= Arabic al-Asd and al-Azd) (c. AD 230–255).

'l-Ḥrṭ bn K'b^m mlk-'s'd

Like the previous rulers, this king is mentioned in a dedication written in Sabaic from Ma'rib in Yemen.

See Ja 2110/8 in Doe & Jamme 1968.

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. Sabaeen embassy ‘to the kings of the tribes of **Ghassān, al-Asd, Nizār^{um} and Madhḥig^{um}**’ (c. AD 255–260).

ʾmlk ʾs²bⁿ Ġs^m w-l ʾsʾd w-Nzr^m w-Mḏhg^m

Like the previous rulers, these kings are mentioned in a dedication written in Sabaic from Maʾrib in Yemen.

See ‘Inān 75 in Bāfaḳīh & Robin 1978.

10. ‘Mālik^{um} son of Muʾāwīyat **king of Kiddat and of Madhḥig^{um}**’ (end of the third century AD).

Mlk^m bn Mʾwyt mlk Kdt w-Mḏhg^m

See MB 2006 I–54, written in Sabaic, unpublished.³¹

Like the previous rulers, this king is mentioned in a dedication from Maʾrib in Yemen.

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

Post-classical Nabataean: *dnh nfšw Fhrw | br Šly rbw Gdymt mlk Tnwḥ*

Greek: *ê stêlê hautê F | erou Solleou | tropheus Gadi | mathou basileus | Thanouênôn*

‘This is the funerary stele of Fihir, 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^{um} son of Kaʾb^{um} **king of al-Asd**’ (c. AD 300–310).

Mlk^m bn K[ʾb]^m mlk-l ʾsʾd

See Sharaf 31/8–10 in Müller 1974.

This king is mentioned in a dedication written in Sabaic from Maʾrib in Yemen.

13. ‘Ḥārithat son of Zaydmanāt, **king of ‘Assān**’ (= Arabic Ghassān) (c. third–fourth century AD).

bl dkyr nšyb Hrtt br Zydmmntw mlk ʾsn

‘Surely, in remembrance of the very noble Ḥārithat 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-Qaḳīʿa, some 50–70 km south-east of al-ʿUlā: see al-Dhuyayb 1426/2005: 65.

14. ‘Imru’ al-Qays son of ‘Amr king of all Arabs’ who ‘became **king of ʾl-ʾsryn**,³² of Nizārū and its kings’, then ‘became **king of Maʾaddū**’³³ (before AD 328).

Mrʾ l-qys br ʾmrw mlk ʾl-ʾrb kl-h ... w-mlk ʾl-ʾsryn w-Nzrw w-mlwk-hm ... w-mlk Mʾdw...

Louvre 205/3, funerary stele of a king, found at al-Namāra in the south of present-day Syria, in Calvet & Robin 1997: 265–269. The text is written in post-classical Nabataean writing, but in the Arabic language.

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 363.³⁴ This figure perhaps bore the title of king, transcribed in Latin by the word *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. ‘Ḥujr son of ‘Amr, king of Kiddat’ (mid-fifth century AD).

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

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 Shanūʿa (from ‘Asir in the south-west of Saudi Arabia) and Asd ʿUmān 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 Shanūʿa 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 Syrians’, makes sense but does not have good parallels.

³³ Nizārū and Maʾaddū reflect Nabataean orthography: they are the equivalent of Nizār^{um} and Maʾadd^{um} in Sabaic and to Nizār and Maʾadd in Arabic.

³⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* XII.2.4: ... Surena ... et Malechus Podosacis nomine, phylarchus Saracenorom Assanitarum, famosi nominis latro, omni saevitia per nostros limites diu grassatus ... This king has already been mentioned in n. 27.

Hgr bn ‘mr^m mlk Kdt

Graffito written in Sabaic, carved not far from the wells of al-Ḥimā (in the territory of Kiddat and Madhḥig^{um}), about 100 km north-east of Najrān (Saudi Arabia). Kiddat 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 Ḥimyarite empire when king Mālik^{um} son of Mu‘āwiyat 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‘laba 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. ‘Amr the King (probably AD 455–456).

A post-classical Nabataean inscription from Umm Jadhāyidh speaks of:

‘mrw ‘l-Mlk

‘‘Amr the King’.

See al-Dhuyayb 2002: no. 109; see also Nehmé 2010: 7–77.

Umm Jadhāyidh lies some 150 km north-west of Madā‘in Ṣālīḥ, 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-Ḥrt ‘l-mlk ‘ly | ‘sys

‘Has sent me al-Ḥārith the King to Usays’.

See Macdonald 2010c.

Scholars usually identify *‘l-Ḥrt* 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 ‘Amr al-Maḥṣūr

son of Ḥujr Ākil al-Murār) is 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’ ‘bwkryb*) and to all their Christian brothers’.³⁵

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 Naṣrid kings of al-Ḥīra and to the Jafnid ones in Syria. Procopius uses vague circumlocutions 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*, LXVII.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 Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbar does not write ‘kings of Ghassān’, but ‘the kingship of Ghassān’ (see Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbar [n.d.]: 370, ‘Cause of the kingship of Ghassān’, *sabab mulk 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-Kalbī, 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

³⁵ Nöldeke 1887: 26–27; Shahīd 1995: 845–850; Shahīd 2002: 29; now Millar 2013: 22–23. I thank Robert Hoyland for the last reference.

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

1. ‘Mundir king of Ḥīrtâ’.

See Guidi 1880–1881: Syriac text: 501, 502 and 507; translation: 481, 482 and 486. See also ‘Mundir of Ḥīrtâ’, Guidi, 1880–1881: 507, translation 487).

2. ‘Mundir son of Zaqîqa king of Ḥīrtâ’ dā-Nu‘mān’.

See Moberg 1924: 5a/12.

3. The ‘Kings of al-Ḥīra’.

See Ibn Qutayba, al-Ma‘ārif 1379/1960: 645: ‘Kings of al-Ḥīra’, *Mulūk al-Ḥīra*; al-Mas‘ūdī 1965–1979: § 1036: ‘On the kings of al-Ḥīra belonging to the banū Naṣr and to other [lineages]’, *Fī dhikr mulūk al-Ḥīra min banī Naṣr wa-ghayri-him*.

4. ‘The Kings of Syria’.

See Ibn Qutayba, al-Ma‘ārif 1379/1960: 640: ‘Kings of Syria’, *Mulūk al-Shām*; al-Mas‘ūdī 1965–1979: § 1076: ‘On the Kings of Syria, coming from the Yemen and originating from Ghassān and other [tribes]’, *Fī dhikr mulūk al-Shām min al-Yaman min Ghassān wa-ghayri-him*.

5. ‘The kings of Taymā’.

See Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamharat ansāb al-‘Arab* 1977: 372, concerning al-Samaw‘al and his family.

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. ‘Amr, king of the Lakhmites’ (end of third century AD). According to a bilingual Sāsānian inscription, written in both Parthian and Pahlavi, discovered at Paikūlī (Kurdistan) and written some time after AD 293, the ruler Narseh 1st (AD 293–302) mentions among his supporters a certain ‘Amr king of Lahmāy [= Lakhm]’.³⁶

A Manichaean text written in Coptic refers also to ‘Amarō, the king of the sons of the Lahim

[= Lakhm]’ (Tardieu 1992: Amarō p-r[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 Judhām and ‘Āmila, was settled in southern Syria. The Sāsānian 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 ‘Amr, king of the Lakhmites’ was a ruler of al-Ḥīra, probably of the royal family of Lakhm.

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

The *explicit* of the second letter attributed to Simeon of Beth Arsham, probably written in July 524,³⁷ uses the title ‘king of the ‘Assanites’, a title one cannot find in contemporary sources: ‘Of the camp of Gəbālā [Jabala] king of the ‘Assanites [Ghassānites] at the place-name Gəbītā [al-Jābiya]’.³⁸

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 Ghassān’ instead of ‘kings of Syria’ (originating from Ghassān).

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 Ghassān, as in the aforementioned inscription (al-Dhuyayb 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 Ghassān (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 Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbar [n.d.]: 368).

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

³⁶ § 92, Pahlavi text, ‘m[rw] Lhm’dyn ML(KA); Parthian text, ‘mrw Lhmyšn MLKA (Humbach & Skjaervø 1983, Part 3/1: 71, § 92; Part 3/2 (Commentary): 126. See also Tardieu 1992: 18 and n. 13).

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).

³⁸ *men ḥīrtō dā-Gabālā malkō dā-‘Assanayē bā-dūktō dā-met-qariyō Gəbītō* (*Shahid* 1971: text IX B, pp. xxxi and 63; Millar 2013).

kings have bestowed power over the confederation of Ma'add^{um} 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 Ḥujr, found on the territory of Madhḥij, a tributary of Kinda, gives credit to this idea (Robin 1433/2012: 70–77).

E. 'IMRU' AL-QAYS SON OF 'AMR KING OF ALL ARABS'
(BEFORE AD 328)

A specific case is offered by Imru' al-Qays son of 'Amr, apparently a king of al-Ḥīra, initially at the service of the Persians, then of the Romans, who called himself 'king of all Arabs' and who claimed the subjection of 'l-'sryn and of Nizār, then of Ma'addū, all referred to above.

Mr' l-qys br 'mrw mlk 'l-'rb kl-h

See Louvre 205/1 in Calvet & Robin 1997: 265–269.

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 Salīḥ, who would have preceded Tha'laba in Syria (see Ibn Ḥabīb's quoted text, above), the kings of Sulaym (Lecker 1989: 219–220) or 'Amr b. al-Iṭnāba 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 Ḥimyar) in the affairs of *Arabia Deserta*. The setting up of Ḥimyarite suzerainty over Kinda-and-Madhḥij at the end of the third century AD is the first expression of this evolution. The inscriptions of al-Namāra and 'Abadān 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 Ghassān) 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').³⁹

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'laba, 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-Muḥabbar.

How Tha'laba 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 'Athamina 1998.

Sigla

ARNA.Nab Nabataean inscriptions published in Milik & Starcky 1970.

CIS II Nabataean inscriptions published in *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars II Inscripti-*

ones Aramaicas continens. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1889–.

JSNab Nabataean inscriptions published in Jaussen & Savignac 1909–1922.

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