

## Middle Sabaean Cultural-political Area: *Qayls*, their *bayt* and *sha<sup>c</sup>b*

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[The Middle Sabaean cultural-political area (South Arabia, the 1st-4th centuries AD) was first of all a system of entities denoted as *'s<sup>c</sup>b* in the Sabaic inscriptions. The key role in the political organization of the area was played by *sha<sup>c</sup>bs* of the second order (*sha<sup>c</sup>bs2*). *Sha<sup>c</sup>bs2* was a system consisting of local communities (*sha<sup>c</sup>bs3*) and the "house" (*byt*) of its *qayls* (*q'wl*) which played the role of the political centre of *sh<sup>c</sup>b2*. The formal structure of the qaylite *bayts* does not seem to have differed considerably from that of large and influential non-qaylite clan communities. Within the structure of the qaylite *bayts* we find essentially the same elements: clan nucleus, female part, *maqtawīs* (personal assistants) of the clan leaders, clients &c. However, on the one hand, the general size of the qaylite *bayts* appears to have been considerably larger than that of the ordinary clan communities; on the other hand, certain elements of the structure of these *bayts* appear to have been excessively large: first of all the qaylite *bayts* had especially many clients, and *maqtawīs*. These characteristics of the qaylite *bayts* allowed them to perform more or less successfully their political functions of the tribal administrative centres].

The Middle<sup>1</sup> Sabaean cultural-political area (SCPA throughout) was first of all a system of entities denoted as *'s<sup>c</sup>b* in the Sabaic inscriptions.

1. In this paper the history of ancient South Arabia is considered to be divided in three main periods:

- a. the Ancient Period (the 1st millennium BC). The Ancient Period can be subdivided into two sub-periods: Ancient Sub-Period I (the Earliest Sub-Period, the Sub-period of the *mukarribs* of Saba', roughly speaking the first half of the 1st millennium BC) and Ancient Sub-Period II (roughly speaking the Sub-Period of the traditional kings of Saba', the second half of the 1st millennium BC).
- b. The Middle-Period (the 1st - 4th centuries AD, roughly speaking the period of the kings of Saba' and dhū-Raydān).
- c. The Late ("Monotheistic") Period (the end of the 4th century - the 6th century AD, roughly speaking the period of the kings with the long royal titles).

While using the period names derived from the respective monarchical titles it is necessary to take into consideration the following points:

- a. the *mukarribs* of Saba' seem to have been the kings of Saba' at the same time (the title of *mukarrib* was much more important than the royal one in the Ancient Period, and those with the former title would not usually mention the latter).
- b. "The Sub-Period of the traditional kings of Saba'" is not relevant for the South Arabian history as a whole, because in this Sub-Period the Sabaean kings, who seems to have lost the *mukarrib* title by that time, were not dominant in South Arabia.
- c. During the period of the kings of Saba' and dhū-Raydān a considerable number of Mārib kings had the title "king of Saba'" (without "and dhū-Raydān"); yet the 1st - 3rd centuries AD of the Sabaean (and Himyarite) history could be called in this way because during this period there was usually at least one king (if not two) with this title: the Sabaean monarch in Mārib could be "the king of Saba'", yet the Himyarite ruler in Zafār would always be "the king of Saba' and dhū-Raydān".
- d. "The Period of the kings with the long titles" starts almost a century before the Monotheistic Period.

As has been demonstrated by Robin, the Middle Sabaic notion of *sha'b* designated in different contexts quite different types of collectivities which constituted a certain structural hierarchy (Robin 1979, 2-3; 1982 a, I, 71-77; 1982 b, 22-25).

*Sha'bs* of the first order (from the top = *sha'bs1*) were quite amorphous ethno-cultural entities lacking any political centralization if they were not identical with *sha'bs* of the second order (= *sha'b2*). Each of such communities cohered because of its common tribal name, common tribal deity, some other common cultural features like "tribal" calendar, eponym &c. Such ethno-cultural entities occupied territories of several thousand square kilometres each. Robin denotes these formations as "*confédérations*" (Robin 1979, 2-3; 1982 a, I, 71-72; 1982 b, 22-23), but it is also quite possible to speak here about the tribe as an ethnic unit (Malinovski's "tribe-nation" - Malinovski 1947, 252-258). *Sha'b1* may consist of several *sha'bs2* ("*sha'bs* of the second order").

*Sha'bs2* were considerably more politically centralized entities occupying territories of several hundreds square kilometres and headed by the *qayls* (Robin 1979, 2-3; 1982 a, I, 71-93; 1982 b, 22-24). Sometimes *sha'bs2* and 1 were identical (the most evident examples are Ma'dhin [M'DNM] and Ghaymān [ĠYMN]). *Sha'bs2* are most often denoted as "tribes" (*tribu, Stamm, plemya*: Rhodokanakis 1927, 119; Hartmann 1909 [1978], 216-217; Lundin 1971, 205, 221, 232, 236; Beeston 1972, 258; Robin 1982 a, I, 71-77 &c); this designation seems to be quite correct, if one considers tribe as a political, but not an ethnical unit, i.e. "tribe-state" as distinct from "tribe-nation" according to Malinovski (Malinovski 1947, 259-261). Equally the *sha'b2* conforms completely to the definition of chiefdom understood as "an intermediate form of political structure that already has a centralized administration and a hereditary hierarchy of rulers and nobility, where social and property inequality is present, but that still lacks a formal and all the more legalized apparatus of coercion" (Vasilyev 1980, 182; for the theory of chiefdom see for example Earle 1987).

Finally each *sha'b2* usually included several *sha'bs* of the third, lowest, order occupying territories of several dozens square kilometres. *Sha'bs* of this order were quite compact autonomous territorial entities with a marked central settlement (*hgr*) which usually gave its name to a whole *sha'b3*. *Sha'b3* could be designated as "local community", but it may be also considered as "section" of tribe (cp. for example: Evans-Pritchard 1940 [1967], 139-147), or "sub-tribe".

*Sha'b2* was not a mere mechanical sum of *sha'bs3*. It was a system consisting of *sha'bs3* and the "house" (*byt*) of its *qayls* (*'qwl*) which played the role of the political centre of *sha'b2*.

There are no grounds to suppose the Middle Sabaean royal power exercised any actual governing through its agents on the level of the "tribes", *sha'bs*. There is no doubt that the *qayls* were **not** the agents of royal power. The stability of the qaylite dynasties really impresses in comparison with the relative instability of the Middle Sabaean royal dynasties. In the 2nd - 3rd centuries AD almost a dozen royal dynasties superseded each other on the Mārib throne, whereas we always find the same clans as the *qayls* of the main Sabaean<sup>2</sup> tribes from the beginning of the Middle Period (and often earlier) till its end (and often later).

2. It is necessary to mention that the Sabaean (SB') were only one of the *sha'bs*, "tribes", belonging to the Sabaean cultural-political area. The members of all the other *sha'bs* (like Ḥāshid, Bakīl, Ghaymān, Ṣirwāh &c) of this area are **never** denoted as "Sabaean" ('SB'N) in the original texts. So to distinguish the "Sabaean", the inhabitants of the area most of whom were not Sabaean and who would have been never denoted as such in the inscriptions, and the Sabaean proper (the members of *sha'b* Saba' who would be denoted as Sabaean, SB', 'SB'N in the inscriptions) it might be reasonable to designate the former as "Sabaean" (in inverted commas) and the latter as Sabaean (without inverted commas). Hence, for example "the Sabaean clans" would mean "clans affiliated to *sha'b* Saba'", like ZFRM, GDNM, ṬKLN, MQRM &c; whereas "the "Sabaean" clans" will denote all the clans of this area including non-Sabaean clans of Ḥumlān, Ḥāshid, Ṣirwā, Ghaymān &c. "The Sabaean Lowlands" (with respect to the Middle Period) would mean the part of the interior Yemeni Lowlands mainly populated by the Sabaean, the areas of Mārib, Nashq and Nashān, whereas "the "Sabaean" Highlands" denote the region of the Yemeni Highlands mainly populated by non-Sabaean, but constituting an integral part of the Sabaean cultural-political area. Yet as such a convention does not exist at present I have to continue the current tradition of denoting all the inhabitants of the Sabaean cultural-political area as Sabaean.

We have sufficient evidence that *qayls* needed the consent (*tqn'*) of other *qayls* (as well as of the Sabaeans and the royal army, *hms*) to become the Sabaeans kings (Ja 562, 4-8; 564, 4-6; Loundine 1973, 190; Lundin 1984, 46; see also Hamdānī 1980, 121), whereas certain clans were *qayls* of corresponding tribes irrespective of the will of any Middle Sabaeans kings.

Bāfaqīh (1990, 62-64) tries to argue the contrary, yet the evidence he presents does not appear really convincing. In fact the only evidence he finds is the disappearance of Nīmrān Awkān, the head of the alliance of an aristocratic Sabaeans KBR-ḤLL and two qaylite clans, ḡ-KBR-'QYNM and Banū SHYMM, and consequently the *qayl* of two important tribes, Bakīl-Shībām and Sum'ay-Yarsum, after his abortive attempt to seize royal power (Bāfaqīh 1990, 62). It is not surprising at all that as a result the leadership of the above mentioned tribes changed. This is completely natural taking into consideration that Nīmrān must have been either killed or expelled as a result of his rebellion. A more important point is that even powerful Ilshara Yaub II turned out to be completely impotent to remove the rebellious clans ḡ-KBR-'QYNM and Banū SHYMM from the leadership of their tribes. In fact we do not know of a single case when any Middle Sabaeans king, even most powerful one, turned out to be able to change one qaylite clan dominating within a certain tribe by another.<sup>3</sup>

Bāfaqīh also provides evidence that "*ce sont les rois, à Himyar, qui désignaient les qayls et les remplaçaient*" (Bāfaqīh 1990, 62).<sup>4</sup> Yet it does not prove anything with respect to SCPA, as there is no doubt that the Himyarite CPA was much more politically centralized than the Sabaeans one (see e.g. Bāfaqīh, Robin 1980, 15; Robin 1981, 338; Korotayev 1990 a).

Bāfaqīh also considers inscriptions Fa 3 and 76 as an argument in his favour. Yet it is rather difficult to understand how these inscriptions could be regarded as "*une intervention du roi dans les affaires intérieures des qayls*". These inscriptions record the grant by the king of certain groups of the royal clients to powerful clans, dhū-Ḥabāb in Fa 3 and 'Uthkūlān 'Aṣyat (certainly not qaylite) in Fa 76.<sup>5</sup> To my mind such inscriptions rather illustrate a considerable weakness of royal power who had to give his own clients to powerful clans to secure their support.

It is necessary to stress that in the SCPA whole qaylite clans and not their individual representatives were usually considered to be '*qwl of sha'bs*'.<sup>6</sup> Even when we observe a single representative of the qaylite clan, he would designate his status through the formula X bn Y '*qwl s'bn* Z "X son of (the clan) Y, (who are) the *qayls* of the *sha'b* Z".<sup>7</sup> In this respect the "Sabaeans North" differs greatly from the "Himyarite-Radmanite South" where this title in such cases would usually be used in the singular, and thus was usually considered to designate individual and not clan status.<sup>8</sup>

3. The Himyarite kings after the final subjugation of the SCPA seem to have tried to replace the leaders of certain tribes by their protégés (e.g. Ja 650; see also Robin 1987). Yet even in these cases they would not replace the original qaylite clan. The whole procedure would be formulated within the framework of the traditional "Sabaeans" political culture through the practice of "clan alliances". The royal protégé would be adopted within the qaylite clan; the whole protégé's clan would be included formally within the qaylite clan as a junior partner.

4. Though even in Himyar the appointment of the royal officials as the heads of the *sha'bs* was done through the traditional framework, through their formal adoption into the respective qaylite clans without the change of the official status of these clans as the formal leaders of the corresponding tribes.

5. One could also add to these texts such inscriptions as C 69; Ja 592, 3-6 (mentioning such an action); R 4134 &c.

6. This situation when the whole clans are considered as the leaders of the tribes seems to find certain parallels in medieval Yemen (e.g. Wilson 1981, 100, 101).

7. See C 282, 1-2; Er 1 §1; 5 §1; 13 §1; 22 §1; 28 §1; Ja 562, 1-3; 631, 1; 644, 1; 649, 1-4; 650, 1-2; 651, 1-4; 654, 1-2; 695, 1-3; R 3990, 1-3; 3993, 1-2 &c; see also Beeston et al. 1982.

8. This phenomenon has already been noticed by Robin (Robin 1982 a I, 79) and Avanzini (Avanzini 1985, 86-87). The Middle Sabaeans CPA in this respect seems to be also different from the Ancient one (the 1st mil. BC). I know 5 cases when individual authors of the Ancient inscriptions use their title *qayl* (*qwl*) to designate their status in the initial formulae of self-identification, and in all those cases they employ the singular form (*qwl*) thus denoting their own individual statuses and not statuses of their clans: C 317, 1; 642, 1-2; R 4231, 1-2; 4624, 6-7; 4638, 1.

As I have already shown before (Korotayev 1990 a, 60-63, 126-185; 1990 b, 10, 16-18) this phenomenon is not fortuitous and must reflect some significant difference between the socio-political systems of the "Sabaeen North" and the "Himyarite-Radmanite South".<sup>9</sup>

In the same manner an important qaylite title *'b'l bytn X*, "possessors of the house X" (where *byt* designates some kind of "castle" - prestigious fortified building, a symbol of qaylite power) is also always used in the plural (this time both in the North and the South). With one author it looks as follows: *X bn Y 'b'l bytn Z* "X son of (the clan of) Y, lords of the house Z".<sup>10</sup>

*'b'l bytn Z* might have also had another implication. Indeed in the qaylite inscriptions<sup>11</sup> *X bn Y 'b'l bytn Z* seems to denote X's affiliation not simply to the clan Y, but to its senior lineage which occupied that particular *bayt*, and at least sometimes was the real possessor of the qaylite title.

For example Banū Bata<sup>c</sup> are usually considered as the *qayls* of the tribe (*s<sup>2</sup>bn*) Ḥumlān (von Wissmann 1964, 324-331; Robin 1982 a, I, 44 &c). Yet it appears that not all the lineages of this clan had this title. For example the author of C 342 identifies himself as *NS<sup>2</sup> KRB 'WTR bn BT*, "Nasha'karib Awtar son (of the clan) Bata<sup>c</sup>" (lines 1-2), without adding anything like *'qwl s<sup>2</sup>bn MLN*, though the context of the inscription<sup>12</sup> clearly shows that the author's clan Bata<sup>c</sup> is that very clan which is usually considered the *qayls* of the tribe Ḥumlān. That leads one to the supposition that not all the clan BT<sup>c</sup> was in fact considered the *qayls* of the tribe Ḥumlān, but only that of its lineages which was denoted as *bnw BT<sup>c</sup> 'b'l bytn WKLM* (see for example Ja 562, 1-2 &c).<sup>13</sup>

This is not really surprising: the existence of the main "Sabaeen" qaylite clans is often attested for several centuries and during this time some of these clans must have grown to a tremendous size. In such a situation the qaylite functions must have been performed not by whole clans, but only by their senior lineages; and certainly all the members of such a huge clan could not reside just in one or two "central" *bayts* of the clan.<sup>14</sup> All that leads one to the supposition that at least in some cases the formula *X bn Y 'b'l bytn Z* denotes one's affiliation to the senior, qaylite lineage of the large noble clan. *'b'l bytn Z* would act in this case as a certain "sub-clan name".<sup>15</sup>

It does not seem to be possible to find any formal artificial apparatus of administration on the level of *sha'b2*. The role of the tribal administrative centre seems to have been performed by the qaylite *bayt* itself.<sup>16</sup> The formal structure of the qaylite *bayts* does not seem to have differed considerably from that of large and influential non-qaylite clan communities. Within the structure of the qaylite *bayts* we find essentially the same elements: clan nucleus, female part, *maqtauwīs* ("personal assistants") of the clan leaders,

9. In the Ancient Period (the 1st mil. BC) it was a part of the Qatabanian CPA.

10. For details see Korotayev 1990 a, 53-60; b, 8-10.

11. And this title occurs only in the inscriptions authored by the *qayls*.

12. The author for example mentions the land possessions of his lineage in *'r QR'MTN*, "the land of (the subtribe) QR'MTN" (lines 8-9), which was without any doubt situated in Humlanite territory (see for example Robin 1982 a, I, 44).

13. Though it was not completely necessary (see for example C 187, 1-3 &c), as in these circumstances the mention of the qaylite title would be a sufficient indication of the affiliation to the senior lineage of the qaylite clan.

14. Though these *bayts* must have also been really huge.

15. In some way in certain cases similar functions might have been performed by "*nisbah*". For example, in Er 27 §1 the authors identify themselves as *'BKRB w-bny-hw 'BS<sup>2</sup>MR bnw RS<sup>2</sup>WN 'BKLN*, "Abkarib and his son Abshamir, the sons (of the clan) RS<sup>2</sup>WN, the Bakilites". On the other hand this clan is quite well attested in Mārib (see for example R 4815 &c) and it is very probable that in this case the "*nisbah*" is used to denote the affiliation of the authors to the branch of RS<sup>2</sup>WN which seems to have migrated to Raydah. In this case 'BKLN would have been used (together with RS<sup>2</sup>WN) as a certain sub-clan name. Hence the beginning of Er 27 might be better rendered as "X and Y, the sons of (the clan) Bakilite RS<sup>2</sup>WN". See also Ja 621, 1-3 &c.

16. The role of the qaylite *bayt* as the political centre of the *sha'b2* seems to be expressed most clearly in an inscription from the Himyarite-Radmanite South, Ja 2867: *'s<sup>2</sup>b-hmw 's<sup>2</sup>b yqln w-lwq bn byt-hmw HRN*, "their tribes, the tribes they govern (in the capacity of *qayls*) from their *bayt* HRN" (line 10).

clients &c. Yet, on the one hand, the general size of the qaylite *bayts* appear to have been considerably larger than that of the ordinary clan communities; on the other hand, certain elements of the structure of these *bayts* appear to have been excessively large: first of all the qaylite *bayts* had especially many clients, and *maqtaawīs*. These characteristics of the qaylite *bayts* allowed them to perform more or less successfully their political functions of the tribal administrative centres.

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## SIGLA OF THE INSCRIPTIONS CITED

- C = CIH - Corpus 1889-1908, 1911, 1929  
 Er - Eryānī 1973  
 Fa - Inscriptions discovered by A. Fakhry - Fakhry, Ryckmans 1952  
 Ja - Jamme 1962; 1976  
 R = RÉS - Répertoire 1929; 1935; 1950