

SABAEAN CULTURAL AREA IN THE 1ST - 4TH CENTURIES AD:
POLITICAL ORGANIZATION AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION
OF THE *SHA'ḲB* OF THE THIRD ORDER

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The Middle¹ Sabaean cultural-political area was first of all a system of entities denoted as *Ḳs2'Ḳb* in the Sabaic inscriptions.

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

Sha'Ḳbs of the first order (from the top: *sha'Ḳb* 1) were quite amorphous ethno-cultural entities lacking any political centralization if they were not identical with *sha'Ḳbs* of the second order (*sha'Ḳb* 2). Each of such communities cohered because of its common tribal name, common tribal deity, some other common cultural features like «tribal» calendar, eponym etc. Such ethno-cultural entities occupied territories of several thousand sq. km each. Robin denotes these formations as «confédérations» (Robin 1979, 2-3; 1982a I, 71-72; 1982b, 22-23), but it is also quite possible to speak here about the tribe as an ethnic unit (Malinovski's «tribe-nation»: Malinovski 1947, 252-58). *Sha'Ḳb* 1 may consist of several *sha'Ḳbs* 2 («*sha'Ḳbs* of the second order»).

Sha'Ḳbs 2 were considerably more politically centralized entities occupying territories of several hundred sq. km (Robin 1979, 2-3; 1982a, I, 71-93; 1982b, 22-24). Sometimes *sha'Ḳbs* 2 and 1 were identical [the most evident examples are Ma'dhin (M'DNM) and Ghaymān (GYMN)]. *Sha'Ḳbs* 2 are most often denoted as «tribes» [*tribu*, *Stamm*, *plemya*: Rhodokanakis 1927, 119; Hartmann 1909 (1978), 216-17; Lundin 1971, 205, 221, 232, 236; Beeston 1972a, 258; Robin 1982a, I, 71-77 etc.]; 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, 259-61). Equally the *sha'Ḳb* 2 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).

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); b) The Middle Period (the 1st - 4th centuries AD);
c) The Late («Monotheistic») Period (the end of the 4th century - the 6th century AD).

Finally each *sha*'*b* 2 usually included several *sha*'*bs* of the third, lowest, order occupying territories of several dozen sq. km. *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*'*b* 3. *Sha*'*b* 3 could be designated as «local community», but it may be also considered as «section» of tribe (cp. for example: Evans-Pritchard 1940 [1967], 139-47), or «sub-tribe».

We know very little about the political organization of these communities. A decree from *Širwāḥ-Arḥab*, ancient MDRM (Robin-Al-Mašamayn 1) shows that some kind of popular assembly might have played a certain role in it. This decree was issued by an assembly described in following words:

1. --- *bnw* Ḡ[Ḍ=]
2. *BM w-DRMT w-s²'bn ḡ-hgrn MDRM*
3. *qsd-hmw w-rgl-hmw w-³dm-hmw ---*

1. «--- (clan) Banū Ḡ[Ḍ=]
2. *BM* and *DRMT* and the tribe² of the city³ (of) MDRM
3. free peasants, soldiers and clients⁴ ---».

As we see, firstly, the inscription provides some (though unspecified) information on the internal stratification of the local community of MDRM, mentioning the main social categories of the population of this *sha*'*b* 3 (*qsd*, *rgl* and ³*dm*) without giving a hint on the probable characteristics of these social strata. Robin and Ryckmans translate *qsd-hmw w-rgl-hmw w-³dm-hmw* as «paysans libres, soldats et clients» (Robin-Ryckmans 1978, 46).

The inscriptions tell us practically nothing about the real functions of these social groups, so this interpretation does not seem completely impossible. Yet some reservations should be made. The most important is that we do not have enough evidence that the division of labour in the Middle Sabaean cultural-political area was so rigorous that within the tribe warriors were quite separate from agriculturalists⁵; but we have abundant evidence that ordinary tribesmen could practise both military activities and agriculture. For example in C 350 one of the Hashidites describes in detail his exploits during the wars against Himyar and Ethiopians (lines 1-10), but on lines 17-18 he begs the Sum'ayites' patron deity Ta'lab to grant them (i.e. his clan) good crops in their (i.e. his clan's - see Korotayev 1991a, 126-85; b, 16-19) fields and

2 Or «the community», or «the people» in the sense of *demos*.

3 In the sense of *polis*.

4 Following the translation of Robin and Ryckmans (Robin-Ryckmans 1978, 46).

5 Though taking into consideration the evidence of Strabo (XVI 4, 25) it does not appear improbable that such a rigorous system existed at least in some South Arabian communities in the Ancient Period.

their lands. See also C 2 (Hashidites), 1-24 (military activities) and 12-16 (agricultural concerns); C 334 (Humlanites), 14-17 (military activities) and 27-28 (agricultural concerns); Fa 119 = YM 358 (CIAS I 39.11/o3 N1) - both military activities and agricultural concerns of a person most likely belonging to 'dm category.

Secondly, an interesting feature of this communal decree is the absence of any mention of the qaylīte clan Banū Hamdān, the political leaders of the tribe (*sha'ab* 2 Ḥāshid) to which this community belonged. It leads one to the supposition that some local communities could have a considerable degree of the internal autonomy.

The internal organization of some local communities of the Sabaean cultural-political area appears to be rather democratic. The most striking feature of Robin/al-Mašamayn 1 is that the legislative assembly includes 'dm, «clients», i.e. the unfree part of the community. The fact that this case is not an exception is confirmed by some others decrees of the local communities (Gl 1573a; Ja 2856; the popular assembly including all the members of the local community and issuing legal norms for this community is also attested in Gl A 744; see also Madrid 1 &c).

Such popular assemblies appear to have had the authority to decide essential issues of the social life of the respective communities such as the regulation of trade at the local market-place (Ja 2856).

The published inscriptions do not provide enough evidence of the existence of any formal leaders of the *sha'abs* 3⁶. This role appears to have been usually performed informally by certain clans which had dominant positions within the respective local communities⁷. Often the leadership over the *sha'abs* 3 was exercised by the alliances of 2-3 influential local clans which would form such an alliance apparently aiming at the securing of the dominant position within their communities. E.g. in the *sha'ab* 3 of DMHN this dominant position belonged to the alliance of the clans Banū RMSM and Banū SMY'M (C 19; 341; 343; DJE 17; 20; R 4030; 4031; 4039; 4338; 4344; see also Müller 1972, 106); Robin/al-Mašamayn 1 cited above evidences such a dominant position within the local community of MDRM belonging to the alliance of Banū ḠDBM and DRMT.

Some clans seem to have become clients of their *qayls* to obtain political dominant position within their communities. They took this step as a move in some political game on the level of local community (*sha'ab* 3). The most probable case of this kind is Banū ḠDBM, who are attested both in a dependent status (C 340) and an independent one (C 286; see also C 287 - Na NNSQ 58, 3-4). Their becoming the clients of their *qayls'* clan, Banū Hamdān, might have been just such a move in their political manoeuvring, aiming to obtain the dominant position in *sha'ab* 3, *ḡ-hgrn* MDRM. Other moves in this political game may have been as follows:

⁶ Though according to Robin communal magistrates appear to be mentioned in unpublished MAFY/Hamir 3, 2 and Ḥamida 2, 4 (Robin 1982a, I, 76).

⁷ This situation when whole clans are considered as the leaders of the local communities seems to find certain parallels in Medieval Yemen (e.g. Wilson 1981, 100, 101).

- 1) the establishment of an alliance with the other influential clan of the local community, Banū DRMT (C 340)⁸;
- 2) the construction of «their» (i.e. of Banū ĠDBM w-DRMT) «town» (*hgr*) TDḤ with the help of their patrons, Banū Hamdān (C 340);
- 3) obtaining the dominant position in the local community *d-hgrn* MDRM (Robin/al-Mašamayn 1, 1-2)⁹.

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⁸ Banū DRMT seem always to have been the clients of Banū Hamdān (C 339; 339 bis; in C 349, 2 a certain *S‘DM YRDF bn DRMT* does not mention his client status, but this inscription is installed by three persons from three different clans and in such cases designations of clans' statuses may be omitted - cf. Er 69 and C 314 + 954); thus the other natural possibility is that Banū ĠDBM might have become clients of Banū Hamdān just as a result of their alliance with Banū DRMT.

⁹ It is remarkable that in this inscription where the double clan is attested on the peak of its political career the clansmen do not mention their dependent status. Banū Hamdān are not mentioned in this inscription at all, notwithstanding the evident importance of this decree.

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SIGLA OF THE INSCRIPTIONS CITED

C = CIH: CIS 1889-1908, 1911, 1929.

CIAS = Corpus 1977.

DJE = Deutsche Jemen-Expedition - Müller 1972.

Er = Eryānī 1988.

Fa = Inscriptions discovered by A. Fakhry - Fakhry, Ryckmans 1952.

Gl = Inscriptions from E. Glaser's collection - Höfner 1973; 1981.

Ja = Jamme 1976.

Madrid = Diaz Esteban 1969.

MAFY = Robin 1977; 1982a.

Na NNSQ = Nāmī 1943.

R = RÉ.S.

Robin = Robin-Ryckmans 1978.

YM = Yemen Museum (Ṣan'ā') - Corpus 1977.