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Witnessed in Stone: Epigraphic Evidence of Addressees of the Prophet's Missives in Ḥaḍramawt

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Abstract. The present article deals with the authenticity of early Islamic historical tradition. The sceptical approach of some Western scholars is balanced by an attempt to substantiate the data available in the Arab Muslim sources with the information from the inscriptions from South Arabia. The author was fortunate to discover an Islamic source, which dates back to the first half of 9th century AD, the *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* by Ibn Sa'd, which comprises the missives of the Prophet Muhammad to two noble clans of Ḥaḍramawt: *dhū* Marḥab and al-Bassī. These clans are also mentioned in two late Sabaean inscriptions, which originate from the territory of Ḥaḍramawt: Beeston – Wādī Sanā' and MM (al-Mukalla' Museum) 157. Therefore, the existence of at least two addressees of the missives of the prophet Muḥammad is confirmed in the epigraphic documents from Ancient Yemen.

Keywords: Prophet Muḥammad, missives of the prophet Muḥammad to tribes of Arabia; historiography, Islamic, early; South Arabia, epigraphy of; clans, pre-Islamic, in Ḥaḍramawt; Ḥaḍramawt

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Засвидетельствовано в камне: эпиграфические данные об адресатах посланий Пророка в Хадрамауте

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Аннотация. В данной статье затронут один из аспектов проблемы достоверности ранней исламской исторической традиции. Автор делает попытку противопоставить крайнему скептицизму некоторых западных исследователей более взвешенный подход, который заключается в верификации данных арабо-мусульманских источников информацией, почерпнутой из южноаравийских надписей. Так, ему удалось обнаружить в исламском источнике, датированном первой половиной IX в. н. э., *Kitāb at-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* Ибн Са'да, среди посланий Пророка имена двух знатных родов из Хадрамаута, зū Марḥаб и ал-Бассй, которые в то же время засвидетельствованы в двух позднесабейских надписях, происходящих с территории Хадрамаута: Beeston – Wādī Sanā' and MM (al-Mukalla' Museum) 157. Тем самым существование, по крайней мере двух, адресатов посланий пророка Мухаммада нашло подтверждение в эпиграфике древнего Йемена.

Ключевые слова: пророк Мухаммад; послания пророка Мухаммада племенам и регионам Аравии; ранняя исламская историография; южноаравийская эпиграфика; доисламские знатные роды Хадрамаута, Хадрамаут

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The problem of the authenticity of early Muslim historical tradition remains crucial for the scholars of Arabic and Islamic history, who deal with the emergence of Islam and the formation of the Caliphate. In Western Islamic studies there is a strong tendency: the scholars almost completely deny the reliability of the early Arab Islamic historical works or, at least, their parts. Two prominent scholars, viz. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, became the “symbols” of this trend¹. Their strongest argument is the lack of independent sources, which confirm the data taken from the Prophet's biography (*al-Sīra*), such as his military campaigns (*al-Maghāzī*), the accounts on the great Arab conquests (*al-Futūḥāt*), etc. However, new discoveries

¹ See, first of all, the following monographs of them: [1; 2].



in the field of South Arabian epigraphy have confirmed some data found in the early Islamic historical works.

Of significant interest are missives sent by the prophet Muḥammad² to the nobility of ancient Yemen on the occasion of their conversion to Islam. In several cases, the names of addressees' clans are also found in the South Arabian inscriptions. For example, the Messenger of Allah sent a missive written down by his official secretary Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān to Rabī'a b. *dhī* Marḥab (of the clan *dhū* Marḥab) al-Ḥaḍramī, his brothers and his paternal uncles (wa-i^{kh}wati-hi wa-a'māmi-hi). In this document the prophet Muḥammad confirmed their rights on their property, such as bees,³ slaves, wells, trees, waters, irrigation channels (*sawāqiya-hum*),⁴ plants, long-bodied female camels (*sharādji 'a-hum*)⁵ in Ḥaḍramawt as well as on any property, which had belonged to the clan *dhū* Marḥab (*wa-kull māl li-āl dhī Marḥab*) [5, S. 21.7-9]. It should be noted that according to the Sabaic inscription Ir 31 in the early twenties of the 4th century AD a member of this ancient Sabaeen clan Laḥay'athat Yaṣḥa', who bore the title *wz 'š 'b-n/Sb'* (commander of the commune of Saba'), was at the head of a military campaign undertaken by the Ḥimyarite kingdom against Ḥaḍramawt [6, c. 252–253, 258]. Besides, in 1962 the renowned British Arabist and specialist in South Arabian Studies Alfred F. L. Beeston published a fragmentary Sabaic construction inscription discovered by Captain A. D. I. Fuller and Captain J. Johnson at a site in Wādī Sanā' located at the eastern extremity of the region of Ḥaḍramawt [7, p. 41]. The edition by A. F. L. Beeston and his translation of it [7, p. 42, tav. X.1] are quoted below with some additions to his comments.

Beeston – Wādī Sanā'

Text

1. .../w-n ']mgd/bnw/Wrw'l' ...
2. .../']lht/Mrḥb-m/[w-]d-Šms-n/w-Bt'-<n>/...
3. .../w-Tg̃m' /w-Shb/w-Mšḥt-n/w-rkb/by<t> ...
4. ...w-]br' /mšn't-hmw/[d- 'sl]m-n/b-ḥlf-n/b-sr-n/...
5. ...yn/m.....hw[']y/y'qby/sr/'slm-n

Translation

1. ...and N']mgd, sons of Wrw'l...
2. ...clans Mrḥb-m [and] d-Šms-n and Bt'-n⁶...
3. ...and Tg̃m' and Shb and Mšḥt-n and Rkb of the family...
4. ...and] constructed their fortress [d- 'sl]m-n at the frontier-post in the valley...
5. ... [who b]oth hold the local magistracy over the valley of 'slm-n

² The majority of them is found in an Islamic source dated from the first half of 9th century AD, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* by Muḥammad b. Sa'd (168–230 AH / 784–845 AD).

³ Even nowadays Ḥaḍramawt is known as a centre of apiculture [3, p. 107–110].

⁴ On that meaning of the term *sāqiya* in Ḥaḍramawt see: [3, p. 155].

⁵ See *shardja'* "chamelle au corps long" [4, I, p. 1212].

⁶ According to the photograph [7, tav. 10.1] the reading *Bt'<y>-<n>* is not excluded and even seems preferable [8, p. 181, n. 5].

*Additions to Commentary*

No doubt, the proper noun *Tḡm'* (l. 3) corresponds to the Arabic ethnonym *Tuḡmā*, i.e. a large subdivision of the tribal confederation of Mahra [9, I, Taf. 328; II, S. 545]. Therefore, a parallel can be drawn between *ḡ-šms-n* and the Arabic name of another subdivision of Mahra – *Ašhmūs* [9, I, Taf. 328; II, S. 201]⁷.

It is worth mentioning that A. F. L. Beeston dated that inscription based on palaeographic criteria from “the end of the fifth or the sixth century A.D.” [7, p. 41]. This is a piece of evidence that the Sabaean clan *Marḥab* mentioned in a missive of the Prophet, did exist in pre-Islamic Ḥaḍramawt. One more name of a clan, viz. *Bṭ'-n*, is also found in Sabaean epigraphy from the Ḥaḍramawt as well as in early Islamic historical tradition. However, in the historical writings, it has another spelling with the *sīn* instead of the *tā'*. The replacement of the *t* with the so-called third sibilant *s*⁸, which does not occur in Arabic, but is rather close to the Arabic *sīn*, in the proper noun *Bṭ'-n* is found in an unpublished fragmentary inscription kept in the Mukalla' Museum (MM 157). According to the Museum documentation, it originates from the site *Qāra Ḥabashiyya* situated in one of the tributaries of *Wādī Sanā'* mentioned above⁹. Its first edition with translation and comments is given below.

MM 157*Text*

1. 't'y^{mn}/w-...
2. ...*hmw*/*M'dkrb*/*Ymgd*/...
3. ...*Dmⁿkrm*/*'qwl*/*w-m[r's*...
4. ...*Bs'y-n*/*hyf*/*w/w-h*...
5.y/y

Translation

1.'at Ayman and...
2. ...their ... Ma'dikarib Yamgud...
3. ...*Damankarim* the *qayls* and h[eads of...
4. ...*Baša'iyiyan* announced and...
5.

Commentary

1. 1, *y^{mn}*: wide-spread “epithet” (second personal name) in the Sabaic onomasticon [12, p. 89; 13, p. 155–156]. It is also attested in Qatabanic [14, S. 91, 305].



Fig. Photograph of the late Sabaean inscription MM 157. Courtesy of the Mukalla' Museum

⁷ Both tribal names derive from the same root, while the pattern *af'ul* is a wide-spread form of the broken plural in Epigraphic South Arabian languages.

⁸ This orthographic phenomenon is typical to the Hadramitic epigraphic language as a result of the fusion of the *t* and the *s* into a single phoneme [10, p. 14: § 8:7; 11, p. 68: § H 2:2].

⁹ The location of *Qāra Ḥabashiyya* is clarified by my colleague 'Abd al-'Azīz *Dja'far Bin 'Aqīl*, Director of the Mukalla' Branch of the General Organization of Antiquities and Museums of Yemen, in his electronic message to me of 08.07.2020.



1. 2, *M'dkrb*: this personal name occurs not only in Sabaic but also in Minaic, Qatabanic and Hadramitic inscriptions [12, p. 553].

Ymgd: one more Sabaic “epithet”, although of rather rare use [12, p. 683; 13, p. 419].

1. 3, *Dmnrkm*: first occurrence of this personal name in the South Arabian epigraphy.

'qwl: a plural form of the term *qayl* borrowed from Sabaic into Arabic which designated a member of a leading clan in an agricultural commune (*š'b*) [15, p. 110].

1. 4, *Bš'y-n*: that form, which represents a relative proper noun derived from *B(š) 'n*, could be used to denote the clan. If we accept the reading *Bš'y-n*,¹⁰ the similarity between these two forms of the clan name will become much greater.

hyf'w: 3 pers. m. pl. The causative stem of the Sabaic verb *yf'* is interpreted as “announce, make known” [15, p. 168].

According to the palaeographic features, this inscription should be dated from the 5th–6th century AD. As to the relative proper noun *Bš'y-n*, it is to be compared with the *nisba* al-Bassī found among a half-dozen “*qayls* and nobleman (*'uzamā'*) of Ḥaḍramawt” to whom the prophet Muḥammad sent his missives [5, S. 33]. The loss of the *hamza* in that *nisba* can be explained by the tendency towards the disappearance of this sound in the Ḥidjāzī dialect of Old Arabic. As a result, at least two names of South Arabian clans attested in Hadramitic epigraphy prove to occur among the addressees' of the Prophet's missives to the traditional nobility of Ḥaḍramawt.

The recent discovery of a late Sabaeen rock inscription in the area of Sawṭ Bā Tays plateau in Ḥaḍramawt allowed a suggestion that its author Baṭḥa', son of Shāfsī (*Bš'bn/šfsy*), appeared to be the founder of the clan *Bš'(y)-n* / *Bš'y-n* [8, p. 181]. Moreover, it is possible to identify him with a certain *Bš'-m* mentioned in the Sabaic inscription Ja 665, who was a commander of a cavalry detachment guarding wagon train of troops of Ḥaḍramawt during a Ḥimyarite campaign against this kingdom, which took place around AD 316–320 [6, c. 250, n. 212; 251, n. 213].

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¹⁰ Cf. n. 6 above.



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