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Middle Sabaean Royal Succession

The Middle¹ Sabaean kingdom appears to have been rather different from an usual hereditary monarchy. The same may be said about some ancient South Arabian kingdoms as well.

Strabo, basing himself on Eratosthenes, maintains the following with respect to the four main South Arabian kingdoms of the second half of the 1st millennium BC (Sabaeans, Minaeans, "Cattabanians" and "Chatramotitae"):

«No son of a king succeeds to the throne of his father, but the son of some notable man who is born first after the appointment of the king; for at the same time that some one is appointed

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, i.e. 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 (1st – 4th centuries AD, roughly speaking the period of the kings of Saba' and dhū-Raydān).
- c. The Late ("Monotheistic") Period (end of the 4th century – 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 Ṣafār 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.

to the throne, they register the pregnant wives of their notable men and place guards over them; and by law the wife's son who is born first is adopted and reared in a royal manner as future successor to the throne» (Strabo 16.4.3; translation by H.L. Jones).

As has been shown by Lundin, the above-cited description appears to be applicable to the Qatabanian kingdom (Lundin 1977; 1978 b; Loundine 1981). Garbini has found some evidence that a similar order of succession might have existed within the earliest Sabaean monarchy (Garbini 1991).

There are no grounds to suppose the existence of a similar order of royal succession within the Middle Sabaean kingship; yet the above-mentioned facts show that the Sabaean cultural-political area had a suitable cultural soil, a cultural background for the development of non-hereditary monarchical forms.

In the Middle Sabaean cultural-political area of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, in most cases of royal succession² known to us succession did not take place from father to his blood son, or to other close patrilineal relative. Out of 17 Middle Sabaean royal successions we know only 5 cases³ in which we can be more or less sure that the succession was from father to son; in many cases, however, we can be completely sure that the successor was not the blood son or even a relative of his formal or informal predecessor⁴, even when one would claim to be the legal successor (for the last version of the Middle Sabaean royal list see Bāfaqīh 1990, 128–136; see also von Wissmann 1964a, genealogische Tafel IIIa; 1964b, 498; 1968, 13; 1976, abb. 22 etc.)⁵.

Furthermore, even when the father was succeeded by his son, the succession does not seem to be always automatic. For instance, 'Alhān Nahfān (from the then allied clan Banū Bata' and Hamdān) succeeded his father Yarīm Aymān on the Sabaean throne. Yet we know a number of inscriptions where 'Alhān Nahfān is mentioned as a person not related to the royal power, simply as '*LHN NHFN bn BT*' w-HMDN, even without mentioning his royal father (C 2; 296; 305; 605 bis, 4 ?/; Ghul/Hut 2)⁶. The Middle Sabaean kings seem to have been conceived not to belong to any Sabaean clan⁷; hence, the mention of 'Alhān's clan affiliation may be considered as an indication to his non-affiliation to the royal dynasty.

² Often it is almost impossible to distinguish legal succession from usurpation.

³ Ilsharāḥ Yaḥḍub I → Watar Yuha'min; Yarīm Aymān → 'Alhān Nahfān; 'Alhān Nahfān → Sha'r Awtar; Fāri' Yanhub → Ilsharāḥ Yaḥḍub II and his brother Ya'zil Bayyin; Ilsharāḥ Yaḥḍub II and his brother Ya'zil Bayyin → Nasha'karib Yu'min Yuharhib.

⁴ E.g. Sha'r Awtar → Laḥay'athat Yarkham → Fāri' Yanhab.

⁵ The most evident case is Ilsharāḥ Yaḥḍub I → Sa'dshams Asra' and Marthad Yuhahmid.

⁶ The fragmentary C 312 seems to be exceptional among all the Middle Sabaean inscriptions as it mentions both the royal status of 'Alhān's father and 'Alhān's clan affiliation. No other cases when both the royal title of one's father and one's clan affiliation are mentioned appear to be known. It is not very surprising, if we consider the fact that the Middle Sabaean kings appear to have been conceived as not belonging to any clan, except, perhaps, the illusive "Salhinid" royal dynasty.

⁷ Royal power seems to have occupied the position which was emphatically outside the clan-tribal system. Any inhabitant of the Middle Sabaean cultural-political area, provided he was not

The authors of C 2 mention *kl msb' sb'w l-s'w'n mr'-hmw 'LHN NHFN bn BT' w-HMDN*, “all the (military) campaigns in which they took part to serve for their lord ‘Alhān Nahfān, the son of (the clan) Bata’ and Hamdān” (lines 10–12); ‘Alhān’s father Yarīm Ayman, the king of Saba’, is not mentioned at all in this long inscription. This text shows that ‘Alhān Nahfān might have reached a considerable age and position within his own clan and tribe without being proclaimed legal royal successor of his father.

The following point should be firmly kept in mind: as it has been mentioned above (see note 7), the Middle Sabaeen kings appear to have lost their original clan affiliation after their succession to the throne. Hence, they could not remain directly in charge of their original clans and tribes. In such a situation it might have appeared to be reasonable to leave one’s own son within his original clan, so that he would perform the leadership functions within one’s original tribe; hence, the full control over one’s original tribe would be kept⁸. Yet C 2 could

of very lowly social status, always mentioned his clan affiliation; even the overwhelming majority of ‘dm, “clients”, would mention their clan affiliation (*qayls* would also refer to their relation to certain tribes, *sha'bs2*; in another form it was often done by the ordinary tribesmen). The Middle Sabaeen kings never mentioned their clan and tribal affiliation after their accession to the throne (though they would naturally always explicitly mention this affiliation *before* their accession), as if they kept aloof from this affiliation. This phenomenon has already been noticed by Robin: “*Le qayl devenu roi relâche quelque peu les liens avec sa tribu: il n'est jamais invoqué en association avec celle-ci. De même n'est-il plus le chef de son lignage d'origine*” (Robin 1982 a, I, 83). The accession to the throne seems to have implied the loss of the previous clan affiliation. It was conceived as the movement of a person from his original “house”, clan community (*byt bny Y*), to the royal “house”, Salhīn Palace (*bytn SLhīn*). E.g. ‘NMRM YH'MN's accession to the throne is described as ‘*tyt m/5.fr'-hmw 'NMRM YH'MN mlk SB' bn W/6./HB'L YHZ mlk SB' 'dy bytn SLH/7./N bn byt bny d-ĠYMN*”, “the entrance of their lord, ‘NMRM YH'MN, the king of SB’ into the house SLHīn from the house of Banū dhū-Ghaymān» (Ja 562). Hence ‘NMRM YH'MN loses his original clan affiliation, now he belongs to the “house” Salhīn, and not to his original “house” of Banū dhū-Ghaymān. His father is now WHB'L YHZ, his predecessor on the Sabaeen throne who is most unlikely to have any kinship relation to Banū dhū-Ghaymān at all. Certainly the subjects of the Sabaeen kings would never allude to their original clan affiliation (at least when they mention them in their capacity of kings and do not deal with the event of the royal succession; only on this occasion the original clan affiliation of the successor could be mentioned). Hence, the Sabaeen royal dynasty does not seem to have been identical with any of the qaylite clan dynasties. When a certain representative of e.g. Banū Hamdān becomes king, it does not mean the formal appearance of the “Hamdanid royal dynasty”, and the qaylite dynasty of Hāshid does not become the Sabaeen royal dynasty. This Hamdanid would officially lose his Hamdanid identity joining the Sabaeen royal dynasty and entering its material (as well as symbolic) manifestation, the “house” Salhīn. Beeston, for example, has already maintained that “the names of the ... royal palaces ... appear to be surrogates for ‘the royal clan’” (1981, 71). It does not appear difficult to find substantiation for this point in the inscriptions. E.g. the Middle Sabaic inscriptions often employ the following formula: *l-dt n'mt w-tn'mn l-*, “for all that has been or will be favourable for —”. Non-royal clansmen would normally indicate their clan after *l-*, “for —” (C 72, 3–4; 75, 8–9; 78, 9–10; 79, 12–13; 83, 7–8; 85, 5–6; 93, 5–6; 95, 8–9 &c; Ja 562, 14–15; 564, 26–27; 606, 16–19; 607, 15–18 &c), whereas the kings would put *bytn SLHīn (w-ĠNDN)*, “the bayt Salhīn (and Ghundān = Ghumdān)” in this position (e.g. Ja 577, 19).

⁸ A similar situation with respect to ‘Alhān’s son, Sha’r Awtar, may be evidenced from Na NSQ 26.

also provide evidence of a certain period of interregnum, when Yarīm Ayman had already died and 'Alhān Nahfān had not yet become king.

In such a situation a reasonable solution for this problem would be to proclaim the son (or the junior brother) king (or heir presumptive) before the death of the royal father (or senior brother). Indeed, this method appears to have been applied several times: by Ilsharaḥ Yaḥdub I with respect to his son Watar Yuha'min (Er 3; R 3990; 4150); by 'Alhan Nahfān with respect to his son Sha'r Awtar (C 308; 308 bis; 401/?; 693; Er 10; Na NNSQ 19; 72+73+71); by Sha'r Awtar with respect to his younger brother Ḥayw'athtar Yaḍa' (C 408; Er 12; Ja 640; 641; R 4842); Sa'adshams Asra' was proclaimed king of Saba' and dhū-Raydān together with his son Marthad Yuhahmid.

Yet all these attempts do not appear to have been very successful: Ḥayw'athtar Yaḍa' does not seem to have been able to reign independently after the death of his senior brother, Sha'r Awtar; Watar Yuha'min was overthrown by the Guratid *qayls* Sa'adshams Asra' and his son Marthad Yuhahmid (chiefs of the tribe [*sha'b*] SMHRM) who proclaimed themselves the «sons» of Watar's father (Bāfaḳīh 1990, 351–353); yet Marthad Yuhahmid does not seem to have managed to remain in power after the death (?) of his father. Even powerful Sha'r Awtar seems to have had to legitimize his royalty once more (Sh 18 §3)⁹.

The formal reason of a Middle Sabaeen becoming the king does not seem to have been one's father's royal status, but the performance of a certain ritual known in Middle Sabaeen inscriptions as *'tyt/twt X 'dy bytn SLHN (w-ĠMDN)*, «X's entry into the *bayt* Salḥīn (and Ghumdān)» (Er 7;18; Ja 562; Na NAG 15 [= Er 9]; Sh 18)¹⁰.

Lundin remarks with respect to Ja 562, 4–7 (*'tyt mr'-hmw 'NMRM YH'MN mlk SB' bn WHB'L YHZ mlk SB' 'dy bytn SLHN*, “the entry of 'NMRM YH'MN, the king of SB', the son of WHB'L YHZ, the king of SB', into the *bayt* Salḥīn”): “A. Jamme traduit ‘return’¹¹ sans donner d’explication, bien que la signification du verbe ainsi que le contexte montrent qu’il s’agit justement de l’arrivée à Salḥīn, vraisemblablement l’entrée en possession de ce château des rois sabéens” (Loundine 1973 a, 186). The authors of the *Sabaic Dictionary* keep the meaning “return, homecoming” for *'tyt*, though they translate *'twt* as “royal accession” (Beeston et al. 1982, 9). There does not seem to be a serious contradiction here, considering that all legitimate kings were very likely to be conceived by the Sabaeans as belonging to one, “Salḥīnid” royal dynasty, irrespective of their real clan origins (see note 7). In such circumstances the “entry” into the royal palace Salḥīn, i.e. the “enthroning”, would be considered as the return of a person who really belongs to the royal dynasty (otherwise he could not become king) to his dynastic palace – a sort of “homecoming”.

⁹ Only if this episode does not refer to Sha'r's as co-regent of his royal father.

¹⁰ Ja 564, 7 attests another variant, *hyhr X byt-hmw SLHN*, “the accession of X to their [i.e. the dynasty's] *bayt* Salḥīn” (for detail see note 13).

¹¹ Jamme 1962, 39, 428.

Two inscriptions, Ja 562 and 564, contain very interesting passages which provide important additional information with respect to this procedure.

Ja 562 mentions 'tyt mr'–hmw 'NMRM YH'MN mlk SB' bn WHB'L YHZ mlk SB' 'dy bytn SLHN bn byt bny d–GYMN hgn tqn'–hw 'dm–hw 'SB'N w–'qwlw w–hmsn, "the entry of 'NMRM YH'MN, the king of SB', the son of WHB'L YHZ, the king of SB', into the bayt Salhīn from the bayt of Banū dhū–Ghaymān, as his subjects, the Sabaeans¹², the qayls and the army, accepted (tqn') him» (lines 4–8).

The author of Ja 564 (incidentally, most likely 'NMRM [YH'MN], himself acting as the Ghaymanid qayl before he became the Sabaean king) refers to the following: mngwm d–b–hw tqn'w w–stydn 'SB'N w–'qwlw w–hmsn mr'–hmw KRB'L WTR YHN'M mlk SB' bn WHB'L YHZ mlk SB' hyhr mr'–hmw KRB'L byt–hmw SLHN, "event in which the Sabaeans, the qayls and the army consented to the accession¹³ of their lord KRB'L to their¹⁴ bayt Salhīn and besought their lord KRB'L WTR YHN'M, the king of SB', the son of WHB'L YHZ, the king of SB', to do so" (lines 4–7).

An interesting feature of these two passages is that the qayls¹⁵ would accede

¹² That is, members of the tribe SB' that played an especially important role within the political structure of the Sabaean cultural area. It is necessary to mention that the Sabaeans (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 Hāshid, Bakīl, Ghaymān, Širwāh etc.) of this area are *never* denoted as "Sabaeans" ('SB'N) in the original texts. To distinguish the "Sabaeans", i.e. the inhabitants of the area most of which were not Sabaeans at all and who would have been never denoted as such in the inscriptions, from the Sabaeans proper (the members of *sha'b Saba'* who would be denoted as Sabaeans, SB', 'SB'N in the inscriptions) it might be reasonable to designate the former as "Sabaeans" (in inverted commas) and the latter as Sabaeans (without inverted commas). Hence, for example "the Sabaean clans" would mean "clans affiliated to *sha'b Saba'*", like HZFRM, GDNM, 'TKLN, MQRN etc.; whereas "the 'Sabaean' clans" will denote all the clans of this area including non–Sabaean clans of Humlān, Hāshid, Širwāh, Ghaymān etc. "The Sabaean Lowlands" (with respect to the Middle Period) would mean the part of the interior Yemeni Lowlands mainly populated by the Sabaeans, the areas of Mārib, Nashq and Nashān, whereas "the 'Sabaean' Highlands" denote the region of the Yemeni Highlands mainly populated by non–Sabaeans, but constituting an integral part of the Sabaean cultural–political area. However, as such a convention does not exist at present I will follow the accepted tradition of denoting all the inhabitants of the Sabaean cultural–political area as Sabaeans.

¹³ *hyhr*: Jamme renders it as "has exalted" (Jamme 1962, 44, 45); the authors of the *Sabaic Dictionary* translate *hyhr* as "win success, glory, renown" (Beeston et al. 1982, 168); Biella interprets it as "conquer /?/" (Biella 1982, 230). All these authors seem to base their interpretation on Hebrew *yāhūr*, "exalted". Yet this basic meaning does not seem to exclude the rendering of *hyhr* as "accession", because the accession to the throne always implies a movement upwards; it is evident, for instance, in Russian *vosshestviye na prestol*, "accession to the throne", which means literally "march upwards to the throne". Biella appears to have come very close to this interpretation in her note on *hyhr* as used in Ja 564, 7: "Sense in Ja 564 may be technical, referring to a ritual (?) of 'exalting' the lord at his accession" (Biella 1982, 230).

¹⁴ Most likely "the royal dynasty's", "the Salhinids' /?"/. The royal plural is not usual in the Middle Sabaean inscriptions at all (unlike the Himyarite ones).

¹⁵ All the non–Himyarite Middle Sabaean kings whose origins we know were *qayls* before they became kings, although, generally speaking, this does not exclude the probability that some kings with unknown origins, like Laḥay'that Yarkham, did not belong to the qaylite clans.

to the throne with the consent of the other *qayls*, the Sabaeans¹⁶ (i.e. the royal *shaʿb* [= “tribe”] Sabaʿ) and the army. One may therefore suppose that the Middle Sabaean kings acceded to the throne as a result of informal election by the three main political forces of the Middle Sabaean cultural–political area. The above–mentioned inscriptions also provide additional information on the special position of these three groups within the political structure of the Middle Sabaean cultural area. These were the three main groups directly dependent on the royal power¹⁷. They would consistently indicate the Sabaean kings (and the kings only) as their terrestrial lords, and would be consistently denoted by the Sabaean king as *ʿdm-hw*, “his subjects”. Yet this dependence does not appear to be one–sided. The kings turn out to have depended on their direct subjects as well. Hence, the three main Middle Sabaean political forces directly dependent on the royal power constituted a kind of “royal electorate”.

It is remarkable that we do not find among the royal electorate the majority of the population of the Middle Sabaean cultural–political area, the ordinary members of the Non–Sabaean tribes (Hashidites, Ghaymanites etc.). It is not very surprising. The ordinary members of the Middle Sabaean tribes would be normally dependent directly on their *qayls* (and some of them were directly dependent on strong non–qaylite clans within their tribes [*shaʿbs*]). Hence, normally they appear not to have had any direct relations with the royal power. All their relations with the royal power would normally take place through their *qayls*; hence it is not really surprising that their consent would not be needed for one’s accession to the throne.

Hence the core of the Middle Sabaean political system was constituted by the relations of interdependence between the royal power and the three main political forces of the Middle Sabaean cultural–political area: the Sabaean community, the *qayls* and the royal army. The control over these three forces made it possible for the Middle Sabaean kings to exercise the control over the Sabaean cultural–political area as a whole.

The above–mentioned hypothesis on the probable order of the accession to the throne by the Middle Sabaean kings seems to be more or less confirmed by Hamdānī, according to whom the Sabaean (“Himyarite”) kingdom during certain periods of its history was more like an oligarchic “presidential republic” than a hereditary monarchy: *wa-kāna qiyām al-malik min qudamāʾ Ḥimyar ʿan iǧmāʾ raʾy Kahlān, wa-fi al-ḥadīth ʿan raʾy aqwāl Ḥimyar faqaṭ*, “the accession to the throne among the ancients of Ḥimyar¹⁸ was a result of the consensus of Kahlān¹⁹, and later that of the *qayls* of Ḥimyar only” (Hamdānī 1980, 121; see also Bāfaḳīh 1990, 68–69).

¹⁶ Mentioned before the *qayls*.

¹⁷ We can say, in other words, that they had no other terrestrial lords except the kings.

¹⁸ “*Al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī utilise cette expression pour désigner les anciens rois*” (Bāfaḳīh 1990, 68).

¹⁹ *S²bn SBʾ KHLN* is quite a usual designation of the Sabaean community in the Middle Period (Ja 653,1; 735,1; Sh 7/1; 8/1 etc.).

This passage seems also to reflect correctly the actual dynamics of the Sabaean balance of power: the important political role of the Sabaean community in the 2nd century AD (e.g. Ja 562 and 564 cited above), and the raise of the political importance of the *qayls* in the 3rd century AD (to the detriment of the *sha'b Saba* – e.g. Ja 574–600; 608–625; Er 1826 &c).

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SIGLA OF THE INSCRIPTIONS CITED

C = CIH – Corpus 1889–1908, 1911, 1929

Er = Eryānī 1973

Ghul = Bron 1992

Ja = Jamme 1962

Na NAG = Nāmī 1961

Na NNSQ = Nāmī 1943

R = RÉS – Répertoire 1929; 1935; 1950

Sh = Sharafaddīn 1967