ANDREY KOROTAYEV

Middle Sabaean Royal Succession

The Middle\(^1\) 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 mukarrib 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 mukarrib 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 Sabaeans 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 Sabean (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 Sabean 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.
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 succession 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 cases 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 predecessor, even when one would claim to be the legal successor (for the last version of the Middle Sabaean royal list see Bāfaqīḥ 1990,128–136; see also von Wißmann 1964 a, genealogische Tafel IIIa; 1964 b, 498; 1968, 13; 1976, abb. 22 etc.).

Furthermore, even when the father was succeeded by his son, the succession does not seem to be always automatic. For instance, ‘Alḥān Nahfān (from the then allied clan Banū Bata' and Hamdān) succeeded his father Yārīm Aymān on the Sabaean throne. Yet we know a number of inscriptions where ‘Alḥān 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/Ḫuṯ 2)6. The Middle Sabaean kings seem to have been conceived not to belong to any Sabaean clan; hence, the mention of ‘Alḥān’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 Ilsharah Yahdub I → Watar Yuha’min; Yārīm Aymān → ‘Alḥān Nahfān; ‘Alḥān Nahfān → Sha’r Awтар; Fāri’ Yanhub → Ilsharah Yahdub II and his brother Ya’zil Bayyin; Ilsharah Yahdub II and his brother Ya’zil Bayyin → Nasha’karib Yu’mīn Yuharhib.
4 E.g. Sha’r Awтар → Lahay’atūth Yarkham → Fāri’ Yanhab.
5 The most evident case is Ilsharah Yahdub 1 → 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 ‘Alḥān’s father and ‘Alḥān’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’tw’n mr’-hmw ‘LHN NHFN bn BT’ w-HMDN, “all the (military) campaigns in which they took part to serve for their lord ‘Alhān Naḥfān, 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 Naḥfān 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 Sabæan 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 own tribe; hence, the full control over one’s original tribe would be kept⁴. 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 (gayls would also refer to their relation to certain tribes, shab’as; in another form it was often done by the ordinary tribesmen). The Middle Sabæan 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 gayl 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”, Sahlīn Palace (bytn Sln). E.g. ‘NMRM YH’MN’s accession to the throne is described as ‘yty m/5r’-hmw ‘NMRM YH’MN mlk SB’ bn W6/HD’L YHZ mlk SB’ ‘dy bytn SLHN/7/N bn bny bny d-GYMN, “the entrance of their lord, ’NMRM YH’MN, the king of SB’ into the house SLHN from the house of Banū dhū-Ḡaymān” (Ja 562). Hence ’NMRM YH’MN looses his original clan affiliation, now he belongs to the “house” Sahlīn, and not to his original “house” of Banū dhū-Ḡaymān. His father is now WHB’L YHZ, his predecessor on the Sabæan throne who is most unlikely to have any kinship relation to Banū dhū-Ḡaymān at all. Certainly the subjects of the Sabæan 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 Sabæan royal dynasty does not seem to have been identical with any of the qaylite clan dynasties. When a certain representative of e.g. Banū Ḥamdān becomes king, it does not mean the formal appearance of the “Hamdanīd royal dynasty”, and the qaylite dynasty of Ḥāshid does not become the Sabæan royal dynasty. This Hamdanīd would officially lose his Hamdanīd identity joining the Sabæan royal dynasty and entering its material (as well as symbolic) manifestation, the “house” Sahlīn. 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 Sabæo inscriptions often employ the following formula: l-d n’m ts-wn’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 SLHN (w-GNDN), “the bayṭ Sahlīn (and Ghundān = Ghundān)” in this position (e.g. Ja 577,19).

⁴ A similar situation with respect to ‘Alhān’s son, Shaʿr Awtar, may be evidenced from Na NNSQ 26.
also provide evidence of a certain period of interregnum, when Ya'rim Ayman had already died and ‘Alhân Nahfân 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 Isharaḥ Yahdib I with respect to his son Watar Yuha'min (Er 3; R 3990; 4150); by ‘Alhan Nahfân with respect to his son Sha‘r Awtar (C 308; 308 bis; 401/2/; 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 Yuhāṃid.

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 Gurātīd qayls Sa‘adshams Asra‘ and his son Marthad Yuhāṃid (chiefs of the tribe [sha‘b] SMHRM) who proclaimed themselves the «sons» of Watar’s father (Bāfaqiq 1990, 351–353); yet Marthad Yuhāṃid 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 Sabaeans 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 Sabaeans inscriptions as ‘tyt’/twt X ‘dy bytn SLHN (w–GMDN), «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 Sabaeic 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, “Salhinid” 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”.

---

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

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

¹¹Jamme 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–’qwln w–hmnsn, “the entry of ‘NMRM YH’MN, the king of SB’, the son of WHB’L YHZ, the king of SB’, into the bayt Sallîn from the bayt of Banû dhū–Ghaymân, as his subjects, the Sabaeans”\(^{12}\), the qayls and the army, accepted (tqzn’) 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 Sabean king) refers to the following: mngwn d–b–hw tqn’w w–styd’n ‘SB’N w–’qwln w–hmnsn mr’–hmw KRBL WTR YHN’M mlk SB’ bn WHB’L YHZ mlk SB’ hyhr mr’–hmw KRBL byt–hmw SLHN, “event in which the Sabaeans, the qayls and the army consented to the accession\(^{13}\) of their lord KRBL to their\(^{14}\) bayt Sallîn and besought their lord KRBL 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 qayls\(^{15}\) would accede

---

\(^{12}\) That is, members of the tribe SB’ that played an especially important role within the political structure of the Sabean cultural area. It is necessary to mention that the Sabaeans (SB’) were only one of the sha’bs, “tribes”, belonging to the Sabean cultural–political area. The members of all the other sha’bs (like Hâshid, Bakîl, Ghaymân, Širwâh 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 Sabean clans” would mean “clans affiliated to sha’b Sabû”, like HZFRM, GDNM, ‘TKLN, MQRM etc.; whereas “the ‘Sabean’ clans” will denote all the clans of this area including non–Sabean clans of Humdân, Hâshid, Širwâh, Ghaymân etc.”

\(^{13}\) hyhr: Jamme renders it as “has exalted” (Jamm 1962, 44, 45); the authors of the Sabaeic 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 yâhîr, “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 vosshesviite 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 Salṭinids’ /?/”. The royal plural is not usual in the Middle Sabean inscriptions at all (unlike the Himyarite ones).

\(^{15}\) All the non–Himyarite Middle Sabean 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 Lahay’that Yarkham, did not belong to the qaylit clans.
to the throne with the consent of the other qayls, the Sabaeans (i.e. the royal sha'b (= "tribe") Saba') 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 power. 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 'dm-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 [sha'bs]). 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 qiyyām al-malik min qudamā' Himyar 'an iğmā' ra'y Kahlān, wa-fī al-hadīth 'an ra'y aqāl Himyar faqat, "the accession to the throne among the ancients of Himyar" was a result of the consensus of Kahlān, and later that of the qayls of Himyar only" (Hamdānī 1980, 121; see also Bāfaqīh 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-Hasan al-Hamdānī utilise cette expression pour désigner les anciens rois" (Bāfaqīh 1990,68).
19 S'msb Sb' 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 Sabaeo balance of power: the important political role of the Sabaeo 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).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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 = Sharafaddin 1967