

QUADERNI DI ARABIA ANTICA 5

Daniele Mascitelli

ARABI  
Arabs Recount Arabia Before Islam  
Part II

«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER



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QUADERNI DI ARABIA ANTICA 5  
series directed by Alessandra Avanzini

DANIELE MASCITELLI  
*ARABI. Arabs Recount Arabia Before Islam, Part II*

Editing and page layout: Alessandra Lombardi  
English text reviser: Geoffrey Phillips  
Cover: Daniele Mascitelli

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**Daniele Mascitelli,**

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1. ARABIA

*History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce*

Karl Marx said.

But sometimes the farce of the present is nothing but the clay  
out of which the tragedy of the past is moulded.



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# Roaming Tribes - Tribes on the Move

## The *epos* of al-Azd and Quḍā'a

I entered the Darkness [Land], magnificently,	whereas there was no supply or dwelling,
With me the nobles and kings of Ḥimyar	and al-Azd – the Azd of Šanū'a and 'Umān,
With me Quḍā'a and Kinda together,	in the middle Maḍḥiġ, and so Hamdān.
I said: "Pick up!" and there, in their hands,	stones: pearls, emeralds and corals.

(from a poem ascribed to the Ḥimyarite king Abū Karib As'ad al-Kāmil)

### *A wizard document*

In 744 CE, soon after the rise of the last Umayyad caliph Marwān b. Muḥammad, frictions occurred in Khorasan between the Governor Naṣr b. al-Sayyār (representative of Muḍar tribe) and Ġuday' b. 'Alī al-Kirmānī the Azdī leader of the Yemenites in the Eastern Provinces. The latter, trying to regain the support of the Rabī'a group, who seemingly moved toward Naṣr, asked 'Umar b. Ibrāhīm – an alleged descendant of Abraha b. al-Šabāḥ said to be the last king of Ḥimyar – to send him a copy of an alliance treaty between Qaḥṭān and Rabī'a subscribed in *ġāhiliyya* times under the king Tubba' b. Malkīkarib. The sneaky tentative was successful and the two groups were able, temporarily, to defeat Naṣr forces in the battle of al-Ḥandaqayn.<sup>1</sup>

Moved by questions of loyalty, appointment of office, fund distribution, etc., such contrasts between governors, generals and tribal leaders were quite common in all provinces of the whole Umayyad Caliphate, leading sometimes to cruel consequences. But the episode quoted above tells us much about the ideological grounds through which such conflicts were set up and solved.

First of all it introduces once more the issue of political contrasts between Arab factions which, even outside the Peninsula, were well based on a polarization between Yemenite (Azd, Ḥimyar, Hamdān, etc., all labeled as Qaḥṭānite) versus Northern (Muḍar, Tamīm, Qays, etc.) tribes, and that this polarization was forwarded back in historical or meta-historical terms. Tribal names occurring in al-Dīnawarī's account reflect the construction of a political discourse in an already stratified framework of genealogies and tribal affiliation.

Furthermore it demonstrates that, as a consequence of that process, resorting such an ancient alliance pact (whether real or fictive), signed by groups whose present communities were proud to be descendent, could sort some kind of effect on the political orientation of a grouping. And this shows the power of story-telling (turned into a history-telling) in giving strength to political positions and strategies.

Another important detail is that someone, still in the eighth century, could claim to be from

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<sup>1</sup> The story is told in al-Dīnawarī, pp. 352-353. Details on Muḍar-Yemen contrasts in Khorasan can be found in Ṭabarī (b. II, pp. 1472-73 and 1858-60).



the offspring of a king of Ḥimyar<sup>2</sup> and could have preserved a copy of a document signed no less than three hundred years before.

The document itself is a very interesting piece of literature. It is reported *verbatim* by al-Dīnawarī, and this not only gives it a strong impression of authenticity, but suggests that this document really existed and that somebody read it and copied it. It certifies the joint and equal alliance of brotherhood between the “*Āl Qaḥṭān*” and the “*Rabīʿa Brothers*”, signed in the month of al-Aṣamm (that is Raḡab) at the presence of king Tubbaʿ b. Malīkarib (who is likely Abū Karib Asʿad al-Kāmil) as guarantor – beside God, of course.

The question is not whether that document was authentic or fictive (the second option being the most likely, despite the eloquent and archaic style in which is written), but what historical (and political) value could it contain for the actors of this story. In other words: what did Qaḥṭān and Rabīʿa mean for an Azdī leader (and a Rabīʿa’s one, as well) in the second century of Hiġra?

To Ġudayʿ al-Kirmānī the expression *Āl Qaḥṭān* likely meant the whole Yemenite groups of his times, since in genealogical reconstructions Qaḥṭān b. Hūd is the ancestor of all Southern Arabs; as for Rabīʿa, many are the groups, both “Northern” or “Southern”, which used to be labelled with this name, and Rabīʿa is also placed as one of the sons of Muḍar or Nizār or ʿAdnān, thus it may also be used as generic term for “Northern”, just like Maʿadd or Muḍar etc.<sup>3</sup> But in this case it was probably referred to a branch of the Northern Tribes, which included Bakr b. Wāʿil, Taglib and ʿAbd al-Qays, with whom the Azd occasionally set up alliances during the Umayyad age.

But in pre-Islamic age, those same tribal names meant something else.

In epigraphic sources Qaḥṭān is mentioned as the royal family of Qaryat Dāt Kāhil (today Qaryat al-Fāw in Southern Saudi Arabia), both in indigenous inscriptions<sup>4</sup> and Sabaic ones. Qḥṭn occurs in two inscriptions from Maʿrib (DAI Barʿān 2000-1, Ja 635), both dealing with military expeditions carried out by S<sup>2</sup>ʿrm ʿwtr king of Sabaʿ and Dū Raydan; one in particular toward Qaryat Dāt Kāhil, where he fought, among others, against a Rbʿt bn Mʿwyt of the family of Twr king of Kdt (i. e. Kinda) and Qḥṭn; this latter was caught and deported to Ṣanʿāʿ. If we cannot be precise about the chronology of the kings of Qaryat al-Fāw,<sup>5</sup> the kingdom of S<sup>2</sup>ʿrm ʿwtr, son of ʿlhn Nhfn (Šahrān Awtar b. Nahfān in later Arab sources) is quite precisely placed in the first decades of third century CE. It is evident that in those times Qaḥṭān was all but in good relations with the Yemenite kingdom.

But some two hundred years later things changed: Qaḥṭān, if did not disappear as a tribal entity, lost all its political relevance and was no more mentioned in inscriptions, while Kinda and Maḍḥiġ and other “Arab” tribes entered under the influence of the kingdom of Saba and Dū Raydan (that is to say Ḥimyar in later Arabic terminology) and fought on its side in several campaigns toward Central Arabia.<sup>6</sup> Some of these campaigns were carried out under the reign of Abū Karib Asʿad b. Malkī Karib – who is likely the king quoted in the document we are dealing with.

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<sup>2</sup> The name of this Abraha b. al-Šabbāḥ is well known in Arab sources, though there is no unanimity whether he was counted among Ḥimyar kings or simply a prince (*qayl*); see *Ikhlīl II*, p. 129, and *Mulūk*, p. 199.

<sup>3</sup> For example the three groups Kaʿb, Kilāb and Kulayb were named after Rabīʿa b. ʿĀmir b. Ṣaʿšaʿ; also three sub-clans of Tamīm were all known as Rabīʿa; see *E.I.I.2* s. v. RABĪʿA ET MUḌAR.

<sup>4</sup> The tomb of a Mʿwyt bn Rbʿt king of Qḥṭn and Mḍḥg has been discovered, see Ansary 1982, p. 65/144.

<sup>5</sup> On this see Robin 2012.

<sup>6</sup> On these campaigns see for example Robin 2014, pp. 38-48, and Robin *forthcoming*.

Memory of these exploits are recorded in Arab Tradition, which also enlarged the dimensions of Abū Karib As‘ad’s success. I found no mention of an alliance with Rabī‘a, though, except just a glimpse recorded in two of the *Ayyām al-‘Arab* collected by Abū ‘Ubayda al-Taymī: the *Yawm Hazāz* and the *Yawm al-burdayn*.<sup>7</sup> In the first, Rabī‘a with Muḍar and Quḍā‘a sent a delegation to an unnamed king of Yemen to rescue some tribe-fellow of theirs held by that king as hostage. After the negative result of the mission, a band of Rabī‘a led by al-Saffāh al-Taḡlibī moved on and, helped by some “people of Tihāma”, ambushed and defeated a platoon of Maḍhīg in Hazāz. Thence the Yemenite king, here called simply Tubba‘, moving toward Iraq, dwelt in the land of Ma‘add, and appointed Ḥuḡr b. ‘Amr Ākil al-Murār, the Kindite leader, over there.<sup>8</sup> In that context, Ḥuḡr had a clash with a Ziyād b. ‘Amr, a Quḍā‘ī who was ruling over Rabī‘a b. Nizār. Beside the unclear events of the story, this could be a situation in which a pact – actually a “peace treaty”, not as “equal” as it appears in al-Dīnawarī’s document – between Kinda (representing the heirs of the Āl Qaḥṭān) and Rabī‘a, with the *placet* of Tubb‘a [As‘ad] b. Malkīkarib, could have been signed.

Unfortunately all these records are really too poor to validate the existence of a Qaḥṭān-Rabī‘a treaty in the shape Ġuday‘ al-Kirmānī and ‘Amr b. Ibrāhīm resorted, thus it can hardly be considered a true fifth century document, and we can only register such records in the body of scanty hints about Yemen-Arabs relations in that same century.

The quoting of the Ḥimyar king Abū Karib As‘ad (as Tubba‘ b. Malkī Karib) in al-Kirmānī document, is anyway remarkable: it was worth mentioning him as the witness of the treaty, since he occupies a great place in Southern Arab history and mythology, and his role as a protagonist of Arabian political and military events of fifth century Yemen and Arabian Peninsula in general is confirmed by external evidences. And his prestige, we see, lasted through ages until the times of Ġuday‘ al-Kirmānī.

Now let’s consider the Azd label borne by the group whose leader was this same al-Kirmānī, and let us consider in depth the reasons why he could profit from such a, true or fake, alliance treaty between Qaḥṭān and Rabī‘a signed under Ḥimyar supervision in his political action.

### *The Azdī “fifth” of Baṣra: a myth workshop*

On the eve of the Islamic Era and in early Islamic age two groups are said to have borne this name: the Azd Sarā, settled in Northern Yemen highlands, and Azd ‘Umān, settled in the Easternmost corner of the Peninsula. Whether these two groups were really related in kinship or if this was a simple case of homonymy is a question that did not worry Arab historians, the first option being the only one taken into account by them.

The Azd Sarā does not seem to be counted among important tribes during the earlier conquests, though fractions of this group took part in the conquest of Iraq and eventually rejoined in the new settlement of al-Baṣra with the Azd ‘Umān, who moved there around 680/61h. This city

<sup>7</sup> *Ayyām* p. 19-25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ayyām* p. 21. Ḥuḡr b. ‘Amr is well known in Arabic sources, but he also left on a rock in Nafūd Musammā, north of Naḡrān, a “signature” in South Arabian script as king of Kinda (see Ryckmans 1957, Gajda 1996, Robin 2012). This allows to identify the Yemenite king of the story as Abū Karib As‘ad.

indeed, which contends with Kūfa to be the first brand-new city of the Islamic Era, was founded some fifteen years after Hiġra as an encampment to support raids toward Iraq and Persia, but soon turned into a conglomerate of urban quarters that could furnish men (counted in dozens of thousands) for the Islamic army.<sup>9</sup> And though some sources<sup>10</sup> say the al-Azd group settled there under Mu‘awiya caliphate (661-680 CE), the first mention of the “fifths” (*ḥums*), i. e. “blocks”, into which the city was subdivided dates to the year 660/39h: one of these “fifths” was named after the al-Azd tribe.<sup>11</sup>

From there the al-Azd took part in the conquest of Iran and subsequently groups of al-Azd were there dislocated in Khorasan and the Eastern provinces; from Azd ‘Umān specifically, a prestigious general came out, Muhallab b. Abī Šufra (d. 702), who was appointed commander of those Eastern provinces by Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik. Around his family and his supporters a strong feeling of solidarity grew, leading to the formation of a sort of lobby, if not a political party.

The so-called “fifths” of al-Bašra indeed also reflected the main groups who acted as political factions in the first century of Hiġra’s struggles for power, expressed under tribal label or generic geographical provenance of the groups themselves. The al-Azd in fact played on different sides in these struggles, but the main strategy, at least till 740 ca., seemed to be supporting the Umayyads (against the Alids and the Zubayrids), joining, or absorbing under their label, some other groups like Bakr and, on a lesser extent, Quḏā‘a, Kalb, Tanūḥ, Ṭayyi‘, ‘Adī, Kinda, Hamdān. Thus it does not sound strange that most of these “tribes”, despite their geographical location in seventh century, would be counted among the tribes of Southern kinship in the *ansāb* literature of later times. The Azdī fifth also occasionally allied with the Rabī‘a (Bakr) against Tamīm (Muḏar) in local clashes – in particular during the second *fitna* of ‘Abdallāh b. Zubayr – reverberating this same enmity in the Eastern province of Khorasan, where those same Basrian groups moved, as the conquests advanced.<sup>12</sup>

But from al-Bašra not only military and political figures emerged: in that same environment indeed also some of the most important intellectual personalities who played a crucial role in building the Arab-Islamic culture grew or were active: traditionists and philologists like Abū ‘Amr b. al-‘Alā’ (d. 154/770), Ḥammaḍ b. Salama b. Dīnār (d. 167/783), Yūnus b. al-Ḥabīb (d. 183/798); the father of Arabic prose and great translator ‘Abdallāh b. al-Muqaffā’ (d. 139/756 or 142/769); the initiator of Arabic grammar al-Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 170/786); the great collector of stories and poems Abu ‘Ubayda Ma‘mar b. al-Muṭannā al-Taymī (d. 209/824) and, some years later the philologist and lexicographer ‘Abd al-Malik b. Qurayb al-Ašma‘ī al-Bāhilī (d. 216/831). All of them and many others, even if born in other provinces, were active, learnt and taught in al-Bašra.

These literates and scholars started the collection, in the first instance, of *ḥadīths*, Quranic readings and other religious material, but also its analysis and linguistic interpretation thus giving birth to the first embryos of Arabic philology. In doing this they often relied on poetry, so

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<sup>9</sup> On the early history of al-Bašra see Pellat 1953, with sources quoted there.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Ṭabarī, b. II 447.

<sup>11</sup> The others were: the Ahl al-‘Āliya from Ḥijāz; the Tamīm (Central-Western Arabia); the Bakr b. Wā’il (Northern Arabia); and the ‘Abd al-Qays. The chronology of al-Azd’s settlement in al-Bašra is partially confirmed by the research of Donner 1984.

<sup>12</sup> On this see Ulrich 2008.

that collecting and writing down oral transmitted poems was a common and extended practice. Beside the traditional *qaṣīdas*, there were many poems of the *naqā'id* (tensons) and *fahr* (boasting) genre, provided with their anecdotal endowments about the circumstances giving rise to those same poems being uttered. In this way they, together with their colleagues of Kūfa, chiefly contributed to a re-producing of (or a producing of) what would later constitute the Arab-Islamic Tradition. But they also started arranging and organizing it, thus setting the bases for a reasoned classification of knowledge that would become a rule since the next century on.

They were deep inside their society and to this subjected, of course, and thus not insensible to the political clashes (*fitna*) which occurred in those first 150 years after Hiġra. Because poetry had always a political purpose, amongst others, also literates and philologists were to pay a fee to their tribal affiliation, or at least to the tribal affiliation of those – *rāwīs* and storytellers, before “history-tellers” – on whose memory they were working on and had to rely on. Thus they occasionally furnished to the fighting factions of their present times ideological material, either consciously or not, whose literary nature took it out of any chronological or historical timing, as shown in the introductory anecdote. We can sum up this process with the words of Charles Pellat:

*Ce qui compte par dessus tout, en dehors de la notion de temps, c'est la naissance, au Ier siècle, de ces familles qui devaient détenir le commandement dans chaque tribu importante. Dans les ouvrages postérieurs, le personnages [...] qui ont une existence réelle, se situent en quelque sorte à l'écart du temps, comme des héros immortels. Cela prouve, semble-t-il, que le passé est toujours vivant et que les générations postérieures s'y raccrochent avec une obstination qui démontre leur manque d'intérêt pour un présent moins glorieux.*<sup>13</sup>

This is the context the record reported by al-Dīnawarī must be framed in. Just as we see that in 744 the Azd-Ḥimyar *liason*, seeking Rabīʿa support, levered the alleged pre-Islamic relationship – but it likely was to recall previous alliances between the Yemenite-Southern grouping and Rabīʿa established during the civil war of some sixty years before – in the same way around the Azdī “fifth” of al-Baṣra an *epos* of Southern tribes (or groups who would claim a “Southern” kinship) was built to include the various groups which in times joined the same Azdī political positions.

One of the ways this “inclusion” could be inferred, was of course crafting a genealogical weaving in which different branches might be grafted into an affordable family tree.

The list of tribes inscribed within al-Azd’s offspring is quite long, including not only groups of clear Southern origins – i. e. whose core-families had settlements in Southern Arabia still in Islamic times – but also groups that played important roles in the history of Arabs in VI and VII century CE in areas quite far from their alleged homeland. For example: al-Aws and al-Ḥazraġ – the very important “supporters” (*anṣār*) of the Prophet in building the first Islamic State in Yaṭrib/Medina – are said, in the Tradition, to descend from al-Azd diaspora,<sup>14</sup> as well as the Ġassān who ruled in sixth century Syria as Byzantine vassals; and (according to some genealogists) also the Laḥm kings in pre-Islamic al-Ḥīra.

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<sup>13</sup> Pellat 1953, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> And these were among the first groups to have settled in al-Baṣra, although they had not a “fifth” of their own.

## Roaming tribes and tribes on the move

The Arab Tradition reconstructed the pre-Islamic movements of these groups, from Southern areas of the Peninsula to the North, through the “myth of dispersion” (*ifīrāq*) – a sort of literary motif to justify the presence of Arab groups of supposed common origins in various geographical and historical contexts – caused by extraordinary events.

Of course geographical mobility is not surprising among ancient Arabs, if we are familiar with the image of the Arab tribe, the Bedouins, a nomadic unit which moves to seek pastures or to raid or to trade, though this is sometimes a misleading “romantic” image. Social mobility – that is the capacity of Arab tribes to split and rejoin in new groups or confederations – is as well testified in both pre-Islamic and Islamic times.

A good example of this is the story of Quḍāʿa (see TALE 4). The partition of pasturelands among clans, the frictions and *faidas* caused by contrasted romances and causing the splitting of groups, the wandering of a group in search of a new homeland and its joining with other roaming tribes, the difficulties in finding suitable room in a sedentary environment: these are all themes well fitting with a “nomadic” narrative pattern, suitable of giving inception to the union (or reunion) of otherwise scattered tribal groups.

The etymological interpretation of the name Quḍāʿa given by Arab philologists is itself explicative. Ibn Durayd reports two hypothesis. The first is linked to the verb *inqaḍaʿa*, meaning “to go far, to leave”, specifically referred to a man who leaves his family.<sup>15</sup> Thus this name would suffice for any group which separated from the mother-tribe. Be this explanation of the name true or not, it is remarkable that the *nomen-omen* destiny of Quḍāʿa is seen in the Tradition as a roaming one. Just like we will see for the Azd, Quḍāʿa are indeed said to have moved South and North, joining with other groups and thus dispersing themselves. And al-Azd-Quḍāʿa’s meetings are more than once recorded in the Tradition concerning the past of these two tribes.

What was more disputed about Quḍāʿa is their genealogical placing: some said they were a Southern tribe; others considered them a Northern folk moved to South and then North again.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Sīra* we read: «Ibn Iṣḥāq said that Maʿadd b. ʿAdnān generated four people: Nizār, Quḍāʿa (they said that actually Quḍāʿa was Maʿadd’s first born, from whom he took the *kunya*), Qanaṣ and Iyād. As for Quḍāʿa he moved toward Yemen by Ḥimyar b. Saba’ [...]. But Ibn Hiṣām said: “The Yemen says that Quḍāʿa is son of Mālīk b. Ḥimyar”».<sup>17</sup>

Two solutions have been suggested to solve this problem: Quḍāʿa’s mother, being a Ḥimyarite or a ʿAdnānite, married in a second wedding the opposite tribesman (either Mālīk b. ʿAmr from Ḥimyar or Maʿadd b. Nizār from ʿAdnān), so her son took the *nasab* of her second husband. As explained by Kister (in E.I.2), this debate about the placement of Quḍāʿa is again linked to the alliance of the Kalb tribe – supposed to be a Quḍāʿa descendant – in the political situation of years the 70-90 of the sixth century CE.

We see that even much later, in fifth-seventh centuries of Hiġra, the Quḍāʿa question still moved the pride of Qaḥṭānite or ʿAdnānite writers. For example Naṣwān al-Ḥimyarī says that:

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<sup>15</sup> *Iṣṭiqāq*, p. 313; see also Robertson-Smith 1907, p. 21: «the name Codaʿa means simply “far removed from their kin”». Ibn Durayd’s second hypothesis actually sounds little with a tribe-name, being connected to the expression *taqaḍḍaʿa baṭnu-hu*, which means “to have stomach-ache”, or “to find a pain in s.o.’s belly”.

<sup>16</sup> On this see Kister and Plessner 1976, p.56-57, and also E.I.2 s.v. *ḲUDĀʿA*.

<sup>17</sup> *Sīra*, I, 9, p. 46.

Quḍā'a's genealogy was traced to Ma'add in the times of *al-ʿaṣabiyya*, under Mu'āwiya and his son Yazīd, who paid a lot of money to their chiefs to cancel them from Yemen [list] and join them to Ma'add. Some Quḍā'a chiefs helped the two caliph in this, but when the Quḍā'a knew it, they got very angry and strongly refused it, so they gathered together and on a Friday entered the Mosque in Damascus against Yazīd uttering this *rağaz* poem:

Hey you who call, call us and announce:

be a Quḍā'ī and do not pretend to be a Nizār<sup>18</sup>

We are children of the master of camels the blossoming

Quḍā'a son of Mālik of Ḥimyar

A well known lineage, that cannot be denied

who says a word [like that] is nothing but a converted to Christ[ian].

And they also said to Yazīd: «We are a folk from the people of al-Yaman, we are able (*yaasi'unā*='we are wide') as they are, and we are bothered by what bothers them, so count us among them». And he said: «Done».<sup>19</sup>

On the opposite side al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. al-Imām al-Manṣūr (d. 630 or 632/1232 or 1234) in his poem on the glories of 'Adnān lineage strongly claimed Quḍā'a's belonging to his kin, making him a brother of Ma'add – as confirmed in the commentary to that poem in ms. Ambrosiana A 68 ar. ff. 84r-111v.

All these arguments about Quḍā'a are quite striking if we consider that in those times (XII-XIII centuries CE) a tribe called Quḍā'a had no longer consistency at all, and even if we look back, Quḍā'a does not occur as a tribe name in (external) sources before seventh century CE. But also in post Hiğra sources Quḍā'a was, rather than a tribe, merely a label shared by some groups like Ğuhayna and Balī, 'Āmila, Kalb b. Wabara and Tağlib, which rightly played an important role in early Islam, particularly in their alliance with Yemen to support Umayyad dynasty, but in those very same days they were rather distant to each other, both from a geographical and genealogical (and sometimes political) perspective. It thus sounds strange, and remarkable as well, that they would recall such an ancient tie in this way.

Anyway, despite the argument of genealogical affiliation of Quḍā'a's, the story of their dispersion aims to reach a quite clear conclusion: to set the origin of certain tribes in certain place, or, in other words, to define what in the seventh century linked those groups which were thence called Quḍā'a, by means of a "nomadic" narrative pattern.

A different tradition – seemingly a Southern one – sets the dispersion of Quḍā'a in the framework of Ḥimyar expansion over the Arabian Peninsula in a "prehistoric" age, which less tallies with the "nomadic" pattern shown in the (Northern) tradition, relating it to the "dispersion myth" of al-Azd.

If we examine the account of the Arab Tradition concerning the groups included in al-Azd label, indeed, it has little or nothing to do with that "nomadic" model. The al-Azd of the story

<sup>18</sup> The verb *tanazzara* would mean literally "to be scarce".

<sup>19</sup> *Šams*, s.v. Quḍā'a, p. 5529; here Našwān is explicitly reporting, in an abridged form, what is in al-Hamdānī *Iklīl* I, p. 59-72.



were well settled and rooted in Ma'rib, being landowners, appointed to local administration and tax collection positions by the kings of Ḥimyar, and only forced to leave their sedentary homeland because of an extraordinary event.

Besides genealogy indeed, the narrative expedient linking all the “Azdite” groups, scattered across the Peninsula and even farther, was the famous myth of “dispersion of al-Azd” after the fall of Ma'rib dam – a story told many times in Arabic literature (see TALE 1).

The fall of Ma'rib dam is an event that was eventually recorded in Quran XXXIV 14-16.<sup>20</sup> Albeit that Quranic passage hardly referred to the story of al-Azd, it did however give anyway an authoritative and sacred hold for it. Some points of this story must be remarked, since it is somehow presented as al-Azd's debut on the scene of history. The story of dispersions of Arabs after the fall of Ma'rib dam, indeed, is so rooted in Arab Tradition that sometimes many forget that, according to the Tradition itself, it involved only the group called Azd, not of course all the dwellers of Ma'rib (or even all the Southern Arabs). These latter indeed stood there suffering the punishment of living in a dried land and “eating bitter fruits” – as the Quran states.

As most versions of the story agree, actually the al-Azd, personified in legends by 'Amr al-Muzayqiyā' b. 'Āmir Mā' al-Samā' b. al-Hārīṭa al-Ashāb al-Ġīṭrīf b. Imru' al-Qays b. Ṭa'laba b. Māzin b. Dir' al-Azd (i. e. six generations after the supposed eponymous ancestor), left before the disaster. Thanks to the foretelling of a soothsayer,<sup>21</sup> 'Amr was able to sell a half of his properties in Ma'rib (a third of the whole irrigated land, it is said) and migrated with all his children and families, thus not being touched by the disaster, *au contraire*, but profiting from it, since he speculated on estate-trading before it (see TALE 1). But of course the al-Azd were just a part of Ma'rib inhabitants.

'Amr and his folk thus moved to the mountains westward, and once reached the Tihāma they split, so that each of his children moved to dwell in different places: Baġīla, Ḥaṭ'am, Bāriq and others in al-Sarā (thence called the Azd al-Sarā); some reached Ḥiġāz and from there split again: al-Aws and al-Ḥazraġ settled in Yaṭrib/Medina, Ḥuza'a around Mekka; Ġafna (Ġassān ancestor) in Syria; Yuḥmad al-Ḥaddān, Mālīk, al-Hārīṭ and 'Ubayd in 'Umān (the Azd 'Umān); Ġadīma al-Waḍḍāḥ moved toward Iraq (though it seems he was a single family, rather than a group), and on the way he joined with other Arabs (namely fractions of Quḍā'a and Ma'add) in a new group called Tanūḥ (see TALE 4), which subsequently put the bases of the kingdom in al-Hīra in lower Iraq.

Thus in this myth many tribal groups, which eventually met each other in al-Baṣra (possibly in its Azdite fifth) and occasionally joined together in the clashes in the first century of Ḥiġra, are grouped under the same name, al-Azd. Beside the possibility that this myth may preserve any vestiges of true historical facts – as we shall try to investigate in what follows – it likely contains some echoes of the migration (this one really historical) of those same groups, or even some single tribesmen, during the Islamic conquests, when many Arabs from the farthest corners of Arabia were pushed outside of it as soldiers toward almost totally new lands.

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<sup>20</sup> The three verses deal with the people of Saba' and are appended to a story of Solomon (just like the story of the Queen of Saba in *sūra* XXVII). Verse 15 speaks of the flood of al-'Arim (*sayl al-'Arim*, this last interpreted as the name of Ma'rib dam) that turned the two gardens (of Ma'rib) into a desolate land as an example of divine punishment against unbelieving people.

<sup>21</sup> A *kāhin*, but according to other sources his wife, or a *kāhina* called Ṭurayfa. On this see also Amaldi *forthcoming*.

Anyway, it is striking that a second tradition<sup>22</sup> puts some Southern groups, and the Azdite as well, in those same areas quoted in the “dispersion myth”, but independently from the accident of the breach of Ma’rib’s dam and even before that. According to this tradition being al-Azd descendant of the Kahlān branch of Ḥimyar-Saba’ kingdom, usually attended to the governance of borders and frontiers of the kingdom (see *ARABII*, TALE 1).

Thus we see that, for example, Naṣr b. al-Azd was already sent by his brother Māzin (attendant to the frontiers for the king ‘Arīb b. Zuhayr) to the East – namely to al-Šiḥr and ‘Umān – to collect tributes from those countries where he installed a Ḥimyarite-Azdite authority in partnership with al-Ġulandā b. Karkar.<sup>23</sup>

Then Ṭa’laba b. Māzin sent one of his cousins, Aḥmas b. ‘Awf b. Anmār, with his folk to al-Ṭawd, that is al-Sarā; and it is specified that among the Banū Anmār the Baḡīla, the Ḥaṭ‘am, the Asad and other groups were counted.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time ‘Amr’s father ‘Āmir Mā’ al-Samā’, as minister (actually *qayl*) of Ḥimyar king al-Milṭāt, already sent an official to Syria to collect tribute, in the person of the Quḏā’ī Zayd b. Layṭ b. Sūd (or Sa’ūd) b. Aslam b. al-Ḥāf b. Quḏā’a; the Quḏā’a stopped in Ḥiḡāz and there split because of friction between Zayd and his clan. Some of them turned back to Yemen and they are the ancestors of the Ḥawlān tribe; some others stood in Ḥiḡāz, and they are the ancestors of the Balī, Ġuhayna and ‘Uḍra tribes; some others went on to Syria, and they are the ancestors of the ‘Āmila tribe and their brothers Banū Wabara (i. e. the Kalb).<sup>25</sup>

In the same way other representatives of the family were already appointed by Kahlānite ministers of the Ḥimyar kingdom to the peripheral provinces, giving birth to “tribes”: for example Rabī’a, alleged ancestor of Hamdān, was sent by his father Mālik to al-Ġawf and the plains and the mountains nearby; Udad, ancestor of Maḏḥiḡ, was sent by his father al-Ġawṭ toward Naḡrān and the region nearby; Ṭawr, ancestor of Kinda, was sent by Nabt b. Mālik b. Zayd b. Kahlān toward al-Aḡqāf (a region traditionally located in Ḥaḍramawt or at its Eastern borders) to rule over the offspring of Hūd; al-Azd was sent by his father al-Ġawṭ to Ma’rib.<sup>26</sup> Many of these tribal names are effectively counted among Ḥimyar allies in its expansion.

The two traditions seem to walk one in the steps of the other, each one representing a sort of inception myth: the first one (“the dispersion of al-Azd”), whose location is inspired by the Quranic passage, traces the origins of Arab groups of alleged Southern provenience, located in Northern areas (Ḥiḡāz, Syria, Iraq, Baḡrayn and ‘Umān) who acted as supporters of local (or foreign) rulers; the second tradition (“the missions of al-Azd’s”, and other Kahlān’s descendants) gives strength to the position of tax-collectors and administrators acquired by the same groups

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<sup>22</sup> This tradition traces back to the anonymous *Waṣāyā al-mulūk* (on which see further, TALE 1), and then repeated by many others like Naṣwān al-Ḥimyarī.

<sup>23</sup> *Waṣāyā*, p. 75-76; *Mulūk*, p. 62-63. The insertion of the Āl Ġulandā in this context is a further attempt to link the mythic past to personages and events of the second and third century of Ḥiḡra in ‘Umān. See Wilkinson 1980.

<sup>24</sup> *Waṣāyā*, p. 77-78.

<sup>25</sup> *Waṣāyā*, p. 81-82, whereas the Ḥimyar king is mis-spelled as al-Fazāz; *Mulūk*, pp. 79-80, where it is also added that: «As for those of Quḏā’a who passed to Syria, Egypt and al-Baḡrayn, their posterity today is still there, they are: Kalb b. Wabara, Tanūḥ, Salīḥ, Ḥaṣīn, al-Qayn e al-‘Alīṣ». On Quḏā’a tribes that will be found among Arabs settled in Lower Syria in the seventh century, see also Riḥan 2014.

<sup>26</sup> *Waṣāyā*, pp. 70-74; these missions are organized in a sequence synchronized with Ḥimyar kings in the second section (*juz*) of *Waṣāyā*.

(or some of their figureheads) in the same areas or elsewhere during the Umayyad Caliphate.

This second tradition does confirm the first one, but it is also more inclusive, since almost all the groups later labeled as “Yemen” are counted. Moreover it is totally detached from the Quranic suggestion, being rather tentatively attached to the mythological chronology of the Ḥimyar kingdom. The different missions of boundary-keeping and expansion set up by the Kahlān-Azd lineage in these sources have more than one extent: firstly to fit in a coherent tribal-kinship framework the organization of the provinces of Ḥimyar kingdom side by side with its expansion. Secondly to provide a political function to the tribes (in the person of their ancestors) charged with those missions and to establish a loyalty linkage between these and Ḥimyar. This means of course a strengthening of the tribal bound inside the “Yemenite faction” of the first century of Hiġra, whereas the “dispersion myth” only explained why some tribes who shared a common kinship were at a time settled quite far from their alleged homeland. Thirdly to synchronize the (mythological) chronology of these tribes with the sequence of the Ḥimyar dynasty with a certain punctuality.<sup>27</sup>

Note that this second tradition, in particular, is also totally detached from the nomadic pattern of “roaming tribes”. In this case, tribes do indeed “move on appointment”, rather than on merely pasture or place searching purposes.

The question now is: can these myths, once stripped of all the narrative endowments and purposive tasks, still bear some grain of real events, or at least a representation of them?

In the light of the third point above mentioned, we might try to give a relative chronology to the mythical events of these narrations and consequently to relate them with historical events which may be effectively dated. The sequence of Ḥimyar kings in the Arab Tradition, when compared to the historical one, is relatively certain since the second half of the third century CE on.

In that chronological framework some figures of Azdite mythology can tentatively be placed.

Unfortunately, the most ancient figures of this “mission myth” involving al-Azd and other groups are placed into a “mythological” phase of the reconstructed sequence of the Ḥimyar dynasty in Arab Tradition (see *ARABII*), whereas we totally lack correspondence with real historical data. Moreover the tradition that handed down this “mission myth” diverges from other traditions in the sequence itself of Ḥimyar rulers. We thus can only consider this myth as placed in a timeless past space preparing and predicting the situation that would be the ready-made one in a more defined time of history.

Nevertheless, the genealogical system of these narrations allows us to reason in terms of generations. So, as for the “dispersion myth”, the al-Azd moving from Ma’rib, soon before the dam-flood, is said to be led by ‘Amr b. ‘Āmir, called al-Muzayqiyā’; this one, it is said, lived a long life and according to internal synchronism with the Ḥimyar kingdom would have served four kings, the last one of which was al-Hadhād,<sup>28</sup> whose reign would be roughly placed around the middle of third century CE, being followed by her daughter Bilqīs and then by Yāsir Yun‘im, who actually ruled in the third quarter of the same century. So ‘Amr b. ‘Āmir would have lived in the two or three generations before preceding this, that is to say at the beginning of that same third century.

This was actually a time of important changes in Arabian, and South Arabian in particular,

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<sup>27</sup> See TABLE in *ARABII*.

<sup>28</sup> *Waṣāyā*, p. 84. This actually contrasts with the statement reported in the same source (p. 94), stating that this event happened under al-Ḥārī al-Rā’iṣ, said to be the “father of Tubba’s” (see TABLE 1), thus moving the chronology backward to some earlier generations.

history. If at the end of that century Yemen was unified under one crown, the previous hundred years saw hard struggle for hegemony both inside the Saba'-Dū Raydān kingdom and between this latter and the neighbor kingdoms of Qataban and Ḥaḍramawt, as well as the surrounding nebula of Arab communities, sedentary or nomad.

In the fights of this century, as depicted in South Arabian epigraphy, we find quite often two main actors: Saba' and Ḥimyar – this latter identified with the Dū Raydān which we find joined together in the royal title since the first century CE on. These two actors in fact occasionally joined together, or maybe one of them prevailed over the other thus claiming hegemony. We see that in the third century Saba' raided several tribes or “communes” which bear the same names we find in the Arab Tradition mentioned above as “Kahlānite” officials of Ḥimyar.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, we see also that many of these tribes or “communes” fight beside Ḥimyar against Saba'.<sup>30</sup>

Among the inscriptions which are most explicative of the relationship between Ḥimyar kingdom and its “Arab” supporters are probably Ir 32 and Ja 665=Ir 39. In both of them, a S'ḏt'lb Ytlf bn Gdnm – who led more than one campaign against Ḥaḍramawt at the orders of the kings Ys'r Yhn'm and his successor Dmr'ly Yhbr (the first ruled in 316-320, and the second in 320-324 according to Robin, but there is an homonym Ys'r Yhn'm who ruled in 260-275) – claims to be *kbr* (something like a Major or General or Official) of the king of Saba', Kinda, Maḍhiḡ, Ḥaram, Bahil, Zayd'il and all the Arabs ('rb) of Saba', Ḥimyar Ḥaḍramawt e Ymnt.

First to be noted is the different composition of the army which moved this raid (defined as a conglomerate of South Arabian “communes” and Arabs) and the conventional title of the sovereign, whereas Dū Raydān replaces Ḥimyar. Secondly in this composition we find some of those same tribal names that would be later included in the al-Azd offspring by Arab Tradition.

We can also consider the composition of Ḥimyar's army in the battle of Hurma (dated around 251 CE) described in inscription MAFRAY-al-Mi'sāl 2 (and Ja 578): here, among the others, we find some princes (*qyl*) of Ḥwln, (Ḥawlān in the Arab Tradition which retains them as belonging to a Yemenite branch of Quḍā'a), one of Bklm (Bakīl is counted in Arabic Tradition among the offspring of Hamdān, or sometimes identified with Ḥawlan himself), and an official (*mqtwt*) of the Hmdn (Hamdān). Many of these, as remarked in the same inscription, fought on horses.

Yet we do not find in epigraphy any group called Azd (for the possible exception of Ir 12 see further), nor Quḍā'a. Nevertheless the involving of groups – that would be later included by Arab Tradition in Kahlān-Azd lineage as Ḥimyar kingdom supporters – inside the military and political structure of the Ḥimyar side of the kingdom of Saba' and Dū Raydān is evident in South Arabian epigraphy during the third century, and can be possibly traced to some decades before, at the end of the second century.

In order to find further chronological hold, we can also look at the Iranic world: since some episodes by which the al-Azd groups (or some of its fractions) broke up into history involved Persian rulers' activity on the Eastern area of Arabian Peninsula, a view to synchronism with Persian history may be significative.<sup>31</sup> In the first quarter of that same third century CE, indeed,

<sup>29</sup> See for example inscription Ja 2110, where the king of Saba' 'ls'rh Yhdb (r. roughly 245-260 CE) targeted a king of 's'd (Asad or Azd? On this see further) and a king of Kinda and Maḍhiḡ in a raid. Also inscription Bafaqih AF 1, though hardly dated, records a raid against Maḍhiḡ.

<sup>30</sup> See for example the two specular inscriptions MAFRAY-al-Mi'sāl 2 and Ja 578, both evoking the same raid, dated 363 of Sabaic Era, i. e. 251 CE, where a raid of Ḥimyar and its Arab allies was (more or less successfully) repelled by Saba'.

the Parthian power declined in favor of the new Sasanian dynasty whose first two rulers, Ardashir and Shapur, involved parts of the Arabian Peninsula in their campaigns to rearrange the Empire and its borders into the new regime and alliances. Some of these episodes, where al-Azd are involved with Persians, are:

- The joining of Ġaḍīma b. Mālik b. Fahm al-Azdī with the Tanūḥ and their settlement in Lower Iraq, as is also frequently recorded by Arab historians;<sup>32</sup> also the “dispersion” of one group of Quḍā’a, moving toward al-Ḥīra, then to Hatra (al-Ḥaḍar) and then to Syria, is placed during the reign of Ardashir (r. 224-240 CE) and Sābūr/Shapur (r. 240-272),<sup>33</sup> under which the fall and destruction of Hatra really occurred (240 c.ca).<sup>34</sup>

- The battle of Salūt, known only through al-‘Awtabī’s report (who quotes Ibn al-Kalbī; see here TALE 3), was fought by an Azdite fraction, together with some Quḍā’a, leaded by Mālik b. Fahm al-Azdī, and the Persian forces of the *marzubān* (governor) for the possession of ‘Umān. Mālik b. Fahm belonged to the Naṣr lineage of al-Azd’s descent – which, we saw, was supposed to have already settled in the South-Eastern area of the Peninsula (Šiḥr and ‘Umān) seven generations before Mālik. Nevertheless, this tradition states that Mālik b. Fahm left from Yemen together with ‘Amr Muzayiqā’ b. ‘Āmir before the fall of Ma’rib dam and moved toward ‘Umān.<sup>35</sup> The Persian king – then dominating ‘Umān through a *marzubān* – is here named Dārā b. Dārā b. Bahmān b. Afsiyād (misspelling for Isfandiyār?), thus tracing back the event to a very ancient time (that of an Achaemenid Darius) that does not fit. It is more likely to be placed the battle at the end of the Parthian or at the beginning of the Sasanian rule. Other traditions record a campaign of Ardashir against Bahrain, and Ardashir’s son, Shapur, claimed possession of Mazūn (i. e. ‘Umān) in two inscriptions.<sup>36</sup> Moreover Yāqūt says that «Aiming to al-Mazūn (i. e. ‘Umān) Ardašīr b. Babāk made the al-Azd into sailors in Šiḥr ‘Umān, six hundred years before

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<sup>31</sup> Though not always precise or correct (and sometimes suspiciously fantastic) chronology of Persian rulers was used by some Arab historians as a measure of synchronizing events of Arabian history.

<sup>32</sup> See for example Yāqūt (*Mu’ğam*, vol. II, p. 328 and ff., s.v. al-Ḥīra) who puts the moving of Tanūḥ – an alliance between Ma’add, Quḍā’a and a group of Azd, sealed through the marriage of Ġaḍīma with the sister of Mālik b. Zuhayr b. ‘Amr b. Fahm (actually her niece) – from Baḥrayn to lower Iraq soon after the fall of the Parthian Empire (here called *mulūk al-ṭawā’if*, a label that includes the Diadochi) and the rise of Sasanian emperor Ardashir I.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Tabarī (b. I, pp. 821-822; vol. V, 20-23 of Bosworth’s English translation) stating that when Ardashir rose to the throne, the Tanūḥ, already settled in Iraq, did not want to obey him, thus he pushed out the Quḍā’a – arrived together with Mālik and ‘Amr, the two sons of Fahm, and some other – who moved to Syria (to join) the other Quḍā’a and Arabs there. They left toward the Iraq country-side and dwelt in al-Ḥīra, in one of the three “thirds” of that city. These thirds were: the third of Tanūḥ (who lived in tents on the Western bank of Euphrates between al-Ḥīra and al-Anbār); the third of the ‘Ubād (said to be the founders of al-Ḥīra); the third of the Aḥlāf (“the allies”, i. e. the city dwellers not belonging to Tanūḥ nor to Wabara who subdued to Ardashir). Involving of Shapur in re-foundation of al-Ḥīra is also confirmed by a Persian source (see Shahrestan, p. 21 and 26).

<sup>34</sup> See TALE 4 and 5.

<sup>35</sup> Actually the synchronism of Arab genealogies would place Mālik as a contemporary of ‘Amr Muzayiqiā’ b. ‘Āmir or a generation later.

<sup>36</sup> On this see Piacentini 1985, Potts 2008 and Potts *Arabia II*.



Islam».<sup>37</sup> Actually only 400 years separate the rise of Ardashir and the beginning of Islamic era, but this is a detail. This statement suggest that the al-Azd were already settled in ‘Umān when ‘Ardashir claimed possession of it, or just made them act on his account. Thus al-Azd in ‘Umān may have acted, willingly or not, as supporters of the Sasanian expansion (possibly before it) against Parthians, thus giving roughly the first quarter of the third century CE as a likely chronological location, or at least a *terminus ante quem*, for the Battle of Salūt.

Another important phenomenon that likely took place in third century Arabia is the increasing development of horsemen military units. North-Western Arabia certainly had consistent acquaintance with Roman cavalry, at least since the constitution of the Provincia Araba in the second century CE, while in Southern Arabia horses were seldom or never used in warfare in Southern Arabia before the third century.<sup>38</sup> The suggestion that both Parthian and Sasanian cavalry – the preeminent weapon of Persian armies – played a role in this cannot be ignored.

Arab Tradition concerning the introduction of the horse in Arabia recognizes, on the one hand, a “northern” role to the character of Solomon/Sulaymān, and a “southern” one on the other hand, to the al-Azd, specifically the Azd ‘Umān, who received from Solomon their first stallion, ancestor of the Arabian stock, as a gift (see further *TALE 2*). We already suggested the possibility that the Sulaymān of Arab Tradition may represent the Syrian kingdom of Palmyra/Tadmur of the third century, with which Southern Arab would have contact (see *ARABI I*).

Anyway is quite sure that the Arabs who introduced and developed the use of horse in warfare – be them the al-Azd or any one else, through contacts with Persian and/or Roman armies – gained increasing relevance during the third century CE: P. Yule specifically calculated an increasing ratio between horsemen and infantry in South-Arabian armies from 1/30 in the first occurrences of the third century, to 1/4 in the fourth century.<sup>39</sup>

To sum up: synchronism internal to the Arab genealogical system, compared with a chronology of external sources, as well as other phenomena, all point to the first half of the third century CE to be the “historical” scenery for all these “mythological” events (the “dispersion” of al-Azd and Quḏā’a and their rearrangement in new tribal-confederation units), which are significantly inferred by the rising of the Sasanian Empire which replaced the Parthian one, on the one hand, and the struggle for hegemony between Ḥimyar and Saba’ which led to the unification of Yemen, and later to its expansion, on the other hand.

Is it by chance that the mythic beginnings of groups, subsequently associated with the al-Azd label (and thence with the Yemenite one), have been all placed in that scenery? And why was the Azd-label, instead of any other, used to group together all those sparse unities?

### *What is an Azd? (Hypothesis on the etymological question)*

Throughout the two centuries roughly between 240 and 440 CE, South-Arabian kings’ title changed from a “short” one (King of Saba’ and Ḍū Raydān) into a “long” one (King of Saba’, Ḍū Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt and Yamnat) and then into a “longer” one (King of Saba’, Ḍū Raydān,

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<sup>37</sup> *Mu‘ḡam*, s.v. al-Muzūn/al-Mazūn.

<sup>38</sup> On this see Ryckans 1973, Beeston 1976, Robin-Theyab 2002, Yule-Robin 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Yule-Robin 2006.