Book review

Jan Retsö*

Nebes, Norbert: Der Tatenbericht des Yīṭaʿamar Watar bin Yakrubmalik aus Ṣīrwāḥ (Jemen). Zur Geschichte Südarabiens im frühen 1. Jahrtausend vor Christus. Mit einem archäologischen Beitrag von Iris Gerlach und Mike Schnelle. Tübingen: Wasmuth 2016. 148S., 74 meist farb. Abb., 1 CD. Lex. 8° = Epigraphische Forschungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel. Band 7. Hartb. € 25,00. ISBN 978-3-8030-2203-5.

<https://doi.org/10.33063/diva-377936>

When I visited Ṣīrwāḥ in Yemen in 1992 together with my friend and colleague Manfred Kropp we were able to study the long inscription known as RĒS (= *Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique*) 3945 + 3946, which stands on a fundament inside the walls of the large temple at the site, describing the deeds of the Sabaean ruler Karib'il Watar. We sat down on a stone close to the inscription and had a long and stimulating discussion about the language and contents of the text. A decade later when a team from the German Archaeological Institute in Ṣan'ā' directed by Dr. Iris Gerlach started systematic excavations of the temple, the stone on which we had been sitting was turned over and it appeared that it contained a similar large inscription, unknown until then. It contains a report of the deeds and achievements of Yīṭaʿamar Watar bin Yakrubmalik, mukarrib (MKRB) of Saba.

The new inscription, now labelled DAI Ṣīrwāḥ 2005-50, contains seven lines each 7 meters long consisting of 328 words altogether, which makes it one of the longest epigraphic texts ever found on the Arabian Peninsula. The text is in an excellent state of preservation and is, unlike RĒS 3945+3946, completely undamaged. The edition by N. Nebes is a true achievement containing everything that can be desired. The beautiful volume contains the following: the text itself in transcription (pp. 9–19), translation (pp. 10–12) and a thorough philological commentary (pp. 12–38), a survey of the structure of the text (pp. 39–41) followed by a similar survey of the Karib'il Watar inscription (RĒS 3945+3946). Remarks on the linguistic peculiarities (pp. 45–47) and the palaeography (pp. 48–53) conclude the more technical part of the edition. Then comes a fascinating discussion on the dating (pp. 54–59) and the historical background of the text (pp. 60–72).

To this are added sections presenting other inscriptions relevant for the large text (pp. 73–81). Among them we are given a new edition of the second part of Karib'il Watar's report of his deeds (RĒS 3946) with a translation (pp. 81–87). The volume is rounded off with a vocabulary of the Sabaean words, a rich bibliography (pp. 88–106) and an instructive article by Iris Gerlach and Mike Schnelle giving the archaeological context of the inscription (pp. 108–116). The final section contains a series of maps of excellent quality (pp. 117–121) and a series of plates, likewise of excellent quality (pp. 122–148), with detailed close-ups of the whole text itself together with the other ones discussed in the volume. The plates are also available on a CD attached to the volume.

The text describes three major military operations by Yīṭaʿamar. One is against WLD 'M south-east of Marib, the entity which is later known as Qataban, another against the town Kaminahu in the Ġauf area north of Saba, and then a series of three connected campaigns against entities in the south-west (Map 3). The latter part of the text reports different land acquisitions ('S₁Y) in the areas conquered. Nebes gives a fascinating sketch of the political development in South Arabia in the 8th–6th centuries BCE. Saba appears as a *primus inter pares* among several local entities in the region tied to the Sabaean rulers by some form of treaty ('HWN, 'HWT). Every entity seems to be defined by a ter-

* Department of Languages and Literatures, University of Gothenburg, E-mail: jan.retso@gu.se.

ritory with its inhabitants belonging to the main local god, a striking parallel to the situation in Syria-Palestine at the same time. The famous covenant formula which is found in Yīṭa'amar's text as well as that of Karib'il expresses the leading function of Saba and its ruler, the MKRB, 'the collector' or 'the gatherer', a title carried by a series of four rulers at this time, of whom Yīṭa'amar and Karib'il are the first. The military operations reported in the two large inscriptions by these two show the concern of the Sabaean MKRB to preserve a balance of power between the entities. Both rulers take action against members of the alliance who threaten to disturb the balance by extending their territories by absorbing their neighbours. The two monumental inscriptions obviously reflect two major crises in the political system headed by Saba.

As far as language is concerned the new text shows some interesting differences from the report by Karib'il Watar. Most remarkable is the consistent use of *w-f'l* as a narrative mainline past tense unlike Karib'il's text which uses *w-yf'l*. To this is added the consistent use by Yīṭa'amar of QTL for 'to kill' whereas Karib'il has HRG. Another feature worth observing is the absence of the *w-X f-yf'l/f'l* construction in Yīṭa'amar's text, a frequent syntagm in Sabaean that has been thoroughly studied by Nebes in a separate monograph. Nebes does not, however, explain the reason for these differences.

The palaeography of Yīṭa'amar's inscription is very close to that of Karib'il's text with one remarkable exception: the sign for S₃ has the form of a circle with six protruding beams reminiscent of an image of the sun. This is an archaic form which is found also in inscriptions on the so-called Five Pillar House in Širwāḥ, dated by archaeologists to ca. 900 BCE. It is not found in Karib'il's inscription and seems to have disappeared after that time. This shows, according to Nebes, that the monumental musnad script was developed before that date which extends the history of Saba back in time by almost two centuries since we have several shorter inscriptions using this form of the sign which consequently, should be earlier than Karib'il. This phenomenon also provides one more argument in favour of the dating of Yīṭa'amar before Karib'il.

The Karib'il text was copied by E. Glaser in 1880 and edited by N. Rhodokanakis in 1927 and it was argued by many scholars that the ruler is identical with 'Karibil, king of the land of Saba', mentioned in texts from the time of the Assyrian king Sennacherib around 685 BCE (H. D. Galter: "On beads and curses", *Annual Review of the Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia Project* 5 (1987) 11–30 texts 51, 53, 66: ka-ri-bi/ka-rib- DINGIR). A YṬ'MR is known from a short inscription on a bronze altar (AO 31929) paleographically datable to this period and in RÉS 3945 (l. 8) a person of that name is mentioned as a predecessor of Karib'il Watar. In the Annals of the Assyrian king Sargon II (f. ll. 120–125. A. Fuchs: *Die Inschriften Sargons II aus Khorsabad*, Göttingen 1994) an 'It'-a-am-ra, the Sabaean, is mentioned in the section about the year 715 BCE and there are thus arguments favouring the identity between him and the author of the new inscription and consequently a dating of it to the end of the 8th century BCE.

The identification of KRB'L WTR with Karib[i]-DINGIR in the texts from Sennacherib's time, i.e. around 685 BCE, is, according to Nebes, 'unstrittig' and 'communis opinio', which actually are two different kinds of argument. He has discussed this problem in detail in an earlier publication (*Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 18 (2007) 25–33). The identification of Yīṭa'amar, the commissioner of the new text, with Ita'amra in the Annals of Sargon II admittedly receives support from the new text, provided that the YṬ'MR mentioned by Karib'il is identical with Ita'amra. One would, however, still like to have more unambiguous evidence before subscribing to the 'Unstrittigkeit' of the claim. At least Ita'amra is a name occurring in texts from other parts of Arabia in this period as well, above all from the north-west (G. L. Harding: *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic names and Inscriptions*, Toronto 1971 p. 658). One of the sons of the Biblical Aaron has the name Itamar (Exodus 6:23) which looks very much the same as Ita'amra. It has also been suggested that there was at least one more Saba in North Western Arabia; the word could be used for several distinct groups (G. Garbini: "I Sabei del Nord come problema storico", *Studi in honore di Francesco Gabrieli nel suo ottantesimo compleanno*

Vol. I. Roma 1984 pp. 373–380). Texts attributed to the Priestly Code in the Old Testament seem to indicate a northern Saba distinct from the southern one (Genesis 10:7; 25:3). The latter is referred to in OT texts from the end of the 6th century BCE (Isaiah 60:6, probably Genesis 10:28). The Priestly Code texts need not to be later.

A main problem is the existence of the so-called frankincense road from South Arabia to Syria. Although it is usually assumed to have existed from time immemorial (so, as it seems, also by Nebes p. 63 note 228) the fact is that definite reference to frankincense from South Arabia is first attested in two poems by Sappho, thus around 600 BCE: the Greek words for frankincense: *libanós*, *libanotós* are most likely derived from a (South-)Arabian *libān* (Arabic *lubān*). Chronologically it goes nicely together with the reference to the South Arabian Saba in the above-mentioned Isaiah text in which we actually also find *lebōnah* as a prominent product from Saba. The occurrence of the word in the Song of Songs (3:6) is a nice parallel to its appearance in Sappho. These texts may emerge from similar aristocratic milieus in which the new exotic perfume had become the fashion around 600 BCE. On the other hand its absence in the aristocratic world of the Homeric poems is remarkable. These would consequently reflect an earlier period. It seems rather that the route was established around 700 BCE. To this is added that there is no mention at all of the frankincense trade in the inscriptions from South Arabia itself. Not even frankincense (LBN) is found in texts from the period concerned here. The earliest documentation of the frankincense road is, in fact, found in Pliny's *Historia naturalis* (12:32:63–65; 1st century CE). It might also be observed that South Arabian frankincense, which is most likely what is referred to by the Hebrew word *lebōnah*, is not mentioned among the gifts presented by the Queen of Sheba to Solomon. Considering the role of *lebōnah* in the Isaiah text its absence in the Queen of Sheba story is worth noticing where we only hear about *besamīm*, 'perfumes', in general. If that story was inspired by trade connections with South Arabia the absence of a specific mentioning of this exotic perfume of high status should be accounted for. Even if the story of the summit meeting between the king of Israel and the ruler of Saba is not datable to the 10th century BCE, the creation of the story cannot be put later than 600 BCE.

It is often taken for granted that the politics of the South Arabian rulers were to a large extent led by the ambition to control the frankincense trade. This is not completely unlikely but it should be pointed out that there are very few, if any, mentions of this trade, or in fact any trade, in the inscriptions of the South Arabian rulers. According to Nebes we have at least one reference to commercial activity in the Yīṭa'amar inscription. The expression *d-mkr̥tm* occurring twice in ll. 6–7 is said to refer to a group of tradesmen and/or their activities which, according to Nebes, have to do with the frankincense trade (pp. 32–33) and would in that case be the first mention of this activity in a South Arabian source. Even if this interpretation is possible, it is not at all self-evident and a critical mind may argue that Nebes overinterprets the evidence. The meaning of the expression is far from certain, which is admitted by Nebes himself who has earlier suggested another interpretation. What is certain is that the texts, including those of Yīṭa'amar and Karib'il, talk a lot about the acquisition of land and agricultural resources. Nobody would assume the existence of a large-scale lucrative trade between South Arabia and the Mediterranean world from the inscriptions we have from Yemen, let alone that the control of this trade was a main concern of the rulers. Undoubtedly, land acquisition was high on their agenda.

All these details: the absence of any mention of the frankincense road in South Arabian texts from the 8th–7th centuries BCE, the absence of the perfume itself in texts outside South Arabia before 600 BCE, including the Queen of Sheba story, the occurrence of the name Ita'amra in other parts of the Arabian Peninsula than Yemen in the same period, even the possible existence of a Saba in North-Western Arabia should make us a little cautious even if they do not mean that the dating argued by Nebes should be discarded or is impossible. The complementary archaeological data are important. According to them there seems to be no reasonable doubt that the two main texts, that of Yīṭa'amar

Watar and Karib'il Watar do indeed belong to the 8th–7th centuries BCE, a fact which makes the identification with the rulers mentioned by the Assyrians possible, although not as certain as many think. At least the counterarguments deserve to be reflected upon once more.

All in all, these remarks do not in any way devalue the edition. Nebes' discussion about the dating is, in fact, excellent and stimulates renewed thinking on the issue. And the book as a whole is truly a magnificent achievement, showing the competence and skill of the author and the importance of the culture and history of ancient Arabia, a newly found land of archaeology and epigraphy, still almost completely unknown even to people who have a professional interest in the ancient Middle East.