

## **Ancient South Arabian epigraphy**

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Almost 15,000 inscriptions comprise the Ancient South Arabian (ASA) epigraphic documentation: one of the largest documentations among the ancient Semitic languages (Müller 2005: 247).

ASA is subdivided into four languages: Minaic (MIN), Sabaic (SAB), Qatabanic (QAT), and Ḥaḍramitic (HAD). For socio-linguistic reasons these languages can be rightly considered four Semitic languages and not four dialects of one language (Stein 2003: 4-5). Eratosthenes, cited by Strabo (*Geographicon* XVI, 4.2), subdivided ancient South Arabia into four main ethnicities. This subdivision perfectly corresponds to the political and linguistic reality of Southern Arabia: Maʿīn, Sabaʿ, Qatabān, Ḥaḍramawt are the main kingdoms in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC.

The ASA languages share a series of cultural and linguistic traits, but there are also clear morphological and lexical differences, which allow us to identify, in the case of fairly long texts, the language and therefore the kingdom of origin. Caution should be taken in reconstructing grammatical rules for epigraphical languages (Avanzini 2014), but, in general, the ASA languages are not scantily attested and it is possible to broadly reconstruct their linguistic system, which will certainly contribute to enriching the general panorama of Semitic philology. It is sufficient here to recall the fundamental grammatical work for SAB by Stein (Stein 2003).

The history of the ASA culture is very long: it spans from the beginning of the first millennium to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Numerous private texts (contracts, letters) written in a cursive writing have provided key characteristics, but the principal written sources, in order to reconstruct this history, are certainly inscriptions. Most of the events which took place over the very long history of pre-Islamic Southern Western Arabia may be reconstructed by basing them almost exclusively on the region's vast epigraphic corpus – a phenomenon which is probably unique in the ancient world (Avanzini 2016). During this long history, linguistic chronological variations are attested (e.g. for SAB see Stein 2005, for QAT see Avanzini 2004: 25-33).

The date of the first attestations of the alphabetic ASA script is a pivotal element for the general history of the formation of alphabets in the Near East (Sass 2005, Avanzini 2016: 70-72). Unlike writings in the Phoenician and Aramaic alphabet, since the earliest phases of ASA documentation two kinds of writing were used: one formal, in capital letters and the other informal, in minuscule (Macdonald 2015: 13-17). The beautiful and regular writings on monuments evolved over time. Even if palaeographic studies are unable to provide absolute dates, it is possible to group the inscriptions into ample periods and propose relative dates (Stein 2013).

The vast majority of inscriptions come from today's Republic of Yemen, but ASA inscriptions are also attested in Dhofār (south-western Oman), in Ethiopia and, even further, to the north of Arabia, in Egypt and in Delos. Geographical variations could be detected within the ASA corpus. The SAB pre-Axumite inscriptions, collected in RIÉ (*Recueil des Inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-Axoumite et Axoumite*), is particularly interesting from both a linguistic and historical point of view (Nebes 2010: 231-

232). For a geographical articulation of SAB, see Stein 2004; for MIN, see Rossi 2014; for QAT, see Avanzini 2004: 513-514; for HAD, see Prioletta 2006. For SAB the great amount of private texts allows us to recognize also some diastratic (socio-linguistic) differences within this language, in particular for lexicon and syntax.

The first piece of information of ASA inscriptions comes from a book by Carsten Niebuhr, (Niebuhr 1779). Niebuhr was one of the five members, actually the only survivor, of the scientific expedition sent to Arabia Felix by the Danish king Frederick V, in January 1761. In 1810 Henry Salt transcribed some SAB inscriptions in Yeḥa, in Ethiopia (Salt 1814). But the study of ASA inscriptions began a few years later, when two officers of the English ship *Palinurus*, James Raymond Wellsted and Charles J. Cruttenden in 1836 copied an inscription in Ḥuṣn al-Ġurāb near Bir ‘Alī, the ancient port of Kanê. Cruttenden copied, in the same year, some inscriptions in Ṣan‘ā’. Thus it was that from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the study and deciphering of the ASA language and writing began.

In 1869 the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris sent Joseph Halévy to Yemen. J. Halévy deserves to be recognized for his commitment in disseminating a large quantity of inscriptions (almost seven hundred !). Between 1882 and 1895 the Austrian scholar Eduard Glaser went on a series of journeys to Yemen. An indefatigable trekker, E. Glaser made copies of almost 300 inscriptions from the central area of the Sabaeen Kingdom and from the Jawf. He also brought to Europe antiques, inscriptions and manuscripts that he sold to support his expeditions. The English presence in Aden was responsible for the start of the important South Arabian collection of the British Museum.

The first SAB grammar is written by the English scholar William Francis Prideaux (Prideaux 1877). The Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris opens inside the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* a section – the fourth part – dedicated to the collection of edited ASA inscriptions collectively called *Corpus Inscriptionum Himyaritarum* (CIH). The CIH volumes are edited from 1889 through to 1932. This is a fundamental work: inscriptions are recorded in ASA writing, transcribed in Hebrew, translated in Latin, annotated and accompanied by plates with beautiful pictures. But there were some limits involved in the monumental cultural operation of the Académie; ASA inscriptions are subjected to different interpretations and translations.

In 1900 the Académie set up a collection of inscriptions in a more simple editorial manner. From the fifth volume (1929) to the seventh (1950) of the *Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique* (RES) only ASA inscriptions were collected. The inscriptions presented only the Hebrew transcription – an understandable choice in terms of the history of Semitic studies, but definitely unjustified and not suitable for reproducing the rich phonetics of ASA. There is also a translation in the language of the editor of the text, accompanied by brief notes in French by Gonzague Ryckmans. No photographs of the text were provided. Despite such limits, the *Répertoire* plays its irreplaceable role of being a collection of texts edited in the most various publications (journals, books, studies in honour, etc.). Its publication was terminated in 1950.

When Giovanni Garbini in the 1970s went to Yemen and published numerous ASA inscriptions (Kitchen 2000: 187-188), he felt the need to gather edited ASA epigraphs. He suggested one of his collaborators, Anna Capuzzi, to publish the MIN inscriptions with texts and bibliography (Capuzzi 1974). Once again the lack of translations and comments made the volume appropriate only for specialists in Southern Arabia.

At least two other editorial projects are worth mentioning here. Jacqueline Pirenne, under the aegis of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris, published four volumes: *Corpus des inscriptions et antiquités sud-arabes* (CIAS), two in 1977 and two in 1986. The volumes are divided into two series, one dedicated to the inscriptions and the other to antiquities. The aim of the collection is completely different from the one of the CIH and RES; the objective is not to collect edited texts systematically. The majority of inscriptions here presented had never been published before. Of course, the work by J. Pirenne thoroughly

deserves merit; she planned a collection also of non-inscribed objects and gave an excellent photographic documentation of texts and objects.

Of particular historical interest is the publication of the volumes of the *Inventaire des inscriptions sudarabiques*, once again under the aegis of Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris and of the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente in Rome, borne out of a project by Christian Robin. The volumes collect documentation from an ancient site, and put together the pieces of its history. The complete documentation of some cities in the Jawf brought to light many aspects of their history (Robin 1992; Gnoli 1993; Avanzini 1995; Bron 1998).

The lack of a collection of edited inscriptions with philological and historical comments was an evident limit in the history of ASA studies. From the mid-20th century a large amount of new texts was to be published, thus improving the linguistic and historical knowledge about the South Arabian kingdoms. South Arabian history and languages were relegated to a field of research for few specialists.

The last decades, in particular, have seen a substantial increase in written documentation to a degree incomparable to almost every other area of the Near East. Since 2000, the Università di Pisa, supported by the information centre of Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, started a new collection of ASA inscriptions to create a digital database: <http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it> (Avanzini, Prioleta and Rossi 2014). The aim of the project has been to collect and preserve documentation that might otherwise disappear. A digital system offers some important advantages over paper publication not only in terms of speed in consulting a text but also in the variety of possible searches. The material collected can be analysed through various predefined indexes (inscription index, word list, object and iconographic index) or through lexical and onomastic queries inside a text or groups of texts. Moreover, the texts collected in a digital database follow the evolution of studies; they can be updated and revised.

A recent important project is the creation online of a SAB dictionary at the university of Jena (<http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de>).

ASA inscriptions, in some cases, are very short and record only a name – such as on the bases of funerary stelae or statuettes – but in some other cases they are long texts syntactically articulated with abundant historical and linguistic data. At least three important textual typologies can be found in the ASA epigraphic *corpus*: construction inscriptions, dedicatory inscriptions, legal inscriptions.

Linguistically, the syntax of the construction inscriptions is simple, with coordinated phrases between them, but these are texts full of historical data. They record numerous names of kings, divinities; they constitute the basis of a historical geography, and also give an idea of the extension of the territory of tribes, or of a kingdom.

Ideologically more important are the inscriptions commemorating the construction of city walls, or the imposing of irrigation systems, often built by the king himself.

Dedicatory texts are laconic at the beginning of ASA history, but later they become longer. Narration of the motives for writing the inscription and thanking the god is inserted in the text. The motives behind such dedications are several. Obviously there are generic requests for protection by the god to the dedicator, for him, his sons and possessions, but the majority of these texts presents complex requests rich in historical and social data. The often difficult irrigation of fields, infectious diseases, the lack of male sons, the constant warfare accompanied by travels toward far-away and hostile lands are among the reasons that guided the requests of dedicators for protection by their god. Within the repetitive formularies at the beginning and at the end of the dedicatory texts, the narration could be syntactically articulated and relatively freer.

The SAB (but also MIN and QAT) legal documentation covers an ample range of juridical matters such as royal land grants, penal law, regulation of economic administrative and religious issues and records of private transactions. The administration of the state was structured and based on a very complicated and articulated legal system. The law played such a profound role in the society that it was intensively written on

records for public display in a unique fashion in the Near East which somewhat adumbrated the classical world (Mazzini 2007: 333-334).

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