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► **To cite this version:**

| Mounir Arbach. Arba<sup>c</sup>ān. Thematic Dictionary of Ancient Arabia, 2023. hal-04672204

**HAL Id: hal-04672204**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04672204v1>**

Submitted on 17 Aug 2024

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# ARBA‘ĀN

*THEMATIC DICTIONARY OF ANCIENT ARABIA,*

(DIR. J. SCHIETTECATTE), 2023.

*Arba‘ān/Arba‘um is the name of a Sabaeen tribe or social group headed by a ruler (malik). It is not clear whether this was an autonomous tribe or a Sabaeen institution.*

In the 7th–6th centuries BCE, Arba‘ān ([Sabaic](#) *’rb’nl’rb’m*) appears as an entity ([tribe](#)/institution?) headed by a personage bearing the title of malik (*mlk*), i.e. ruler. South Arabian documentation informs us of the existence of two of its leaders: ‘Ammī’aman son of Nabaṭ’īl ([CIH 487](#)) and Yatha‘karib son of ‘Ammī’aman ([Fa 69](#)).

This entity is closely related to the kingdom of [Saba’](#): the epigraphic mentions come from the [Ma’rib](#) and [Sirwāh](#) area; its rulers use the Sabaic language; they invoke the Sabaeen deities [Almaqah](#) and [Hawbas](#), as well as the Sabaeen rulers Yada‘’īl and Yatha‘’amar ([Fa 69](#)).

In the second half of the first millennium BCE, Arba‘ān is mentioned twice: on one hand in inscription [CIH 601](#), where mention is made of ‘Nabaṭ’īl ruler of Arba‘ān’, who participates in the promulgation of decrees alongside the rulers of Saba’ (Robin 2013: 167); and, on the other hand, in [RES 3951](#) where Arba‘ān is one of the dominant groups (tribes and institutions) of the kingdom of Saba’ assisting the king in his legal decisions.

The last mention of Arba‘ān appears in a [cursive](#) inscription on a [palm](#) stick dating from the 2nd-3rd cent. CE, where someone is called ‘Wa’d’īl dhu-Arba‘ān’ (ATHS 66/6–7: *W’d’l d-’rb’n*).

Two assumptions can be made to define Arba‘ān:

- It is either a tribe located in the historical territory of Saba’ and ruled by a king who had pledged allegiance to the mukarribs of Saba’. The absence of any mention of Arba‘ān among the territories conquered by the Saba’ *mukarribs* in the 8th-7th centuries BCE points in this direction (Arbach 2002: 257–259).
- Or it is a Sabaeen institution playing a role in the elaboration of normative texts, as suggested by [CIH 601](#). Several arguments tend to point in this direction: Arba‘ān is never referred to as a tribe (*s<sup>2</sup>b*), it does not seem to have a territory of its own as all mentions emanate from the heart of the Sabaeen territory; the title of its rulers, malik (*mlk*), was not only borne by kings, but also in at least one case by the leader of a possible religious brotherhood (inscription [MSM 3645](#)).

No mention of Arba‘ān is known beyond the 3rd century CE. The name does not appear in any Arabic source.

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## References

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Alternate spellings: Arba'ān, Arba'ān, Arba'ān, Arba'an, 'Arba'ān, 'Arba'ān, 'Arba'ān, 'Arba'an, 'rb'n, 'rb'n