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## Najrān

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## Investigating and mapping Ancient Arabia

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### NAJRĀN

*Oasis, settlement and pre-Islamic tribe of Southwest Arabia (today in Saudi Arabia). It was a major site along the caravan roads linking South Arabia to the Gulf and the Mediterranean.*

Najrān (Sab. Nagrān; Gr. Νεγράνων /Ναγαρα; Lat. Negrana /Nagara) is a 40-km-long [oasis](#) located along the Wādī Najrān in southwest Saudi Arabia. Najrān is also the name of the main city, and of the [tribe](#) who settled there in the early Christian era. The luxuriance of the oasis and its unique location on the [caravan roads](#) fostered regional development from the first millennium BCE onwards. The richness of the oasis is echoed in a 3rd cent. [Sabaic](#) inscription ([Ja 576+577](#)) which mentions 68 settlements, 60,000 fields, and 97 wells. [Ammianus Marcellinus](#) counted Najrān as one of the seven chief cities in *Arabia Felix* (Amm. Marc. *Res Gestae*, 23.6.47).

When leaving South Arabia, Najrān was the last fertile valley before entering the barren areas of desert Arabia, at the crossroads for caravaneers heading toward the Mediterranean Sea, along the Hijaz range, or towards the Persian Gulf, through the Wādī Dawāsir.

From the 8th to the 6th centuries BCE, the valley of Najrān was the heart of the kingdom of [Muha'mir](#), with its capital city at Ragmat (Hebr. *Ra'mah* – Gen 10: 7, 7; Ezek 27: 22). Around the 5th century BCE, the kingdom of [Amir](#) succeeded that of Muha'mir; Ragmat was abandoned in favour of a new capital city, and Zirbān, later called Najrān, was occupied until the early Islamic era. This town is identified with the modern ruins of al-Ukhdūd, on the right bank of the Wādī Najrān.

Archaeological excavations revealed a planned city, consisting of a regular square bisected by a main street into two equal parts (**Fig. 1**). Surrounded by an *extra muros* settlement, the town extended over 50 ha. The main deity [dhu-Samāwī](#) was worshipped in the [temple](#) Ka'batan.

Owing to the strategic location of Najrān, neighbouring kingdoms took a keen interest in its control. Coveted by the kingdom of [Saba'](#), the city of Ragmat was burned down during a military expedition. Thereafter, Najrān joined the trade coalition headed by the South Arabian kingdom of [Ma'in](#) (4th to 2nd centuries BCE). In 25 BCE, the town was seized by [Aelius Gallus's](#) expedition ([Strab. Geogr.](#) 16.4.24; [Plin. HN](#) 6.32.160) and a few decades later, Saba' took control of the oasis, a rule which was disputed by [Aksum](#) for a short period (ca. 210–240 CE). In 328 CE, in his epitaph found at al-Namara in Syria (Louvre Museum, [AO 4083](#)), [Mara'l-Qays](#), son of 'Amraw king of all 'Arab, said he fought with the tribe of [Madhhij](#) “until he struck with his spear the gates of Najrān, the city of [Shammar](#) [Yuhar'ish, the king of [Himyar](#)].” The fate of the inhabitants of Najrān was then intrinsically tied to Himyarite policy.

When the Himyarite kings chose [Judaism](#) (ca. 380 CE) and rejected pagan cults, it

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is likely that the inhabitants of the oasis – under their control – did likewise. Around 450 CE, groups of Najrānites converted to [Christianity](#) through contact with the Monophysite milieu of Syria and Nestorians from al-Hīra in Iraq (Robin 2008). The proselytism of the Monophysite community and their connections to [Byzantium](#) led to the first wave of persecutions by the Himyarite king [Shurihbi'īl Yakkuf](#): the beheading of Azqīr, priest of Najrān, reported ca. 475 in the *Martyrdom of Azqir* (Conti Rossini 1910); the stoning of Paul, bishop of Najrān, ca. 500, mentioned in the *Letter of Simeon of Beth-Arsham* (Shahid 1971). The second wave of persecutions was conducted by the Jewish Himyarite king [Yūsuf As'ar](#) in 523 CE: the *Book of the Himyarites* describes a five-month siege followed by the slaughter of many Christians (Moberg 1924). The massacre was fraught with consequences: an expedition carried out by the Aksumite king [Kaleb](#) led to the elimination of Yūsuf and the subjugation of Ḥimyar to the Aksumite princes for half a century.

After these events, the inhabitants of Najrān claim to be members of the banū al-Hārith bin Ka'b tribe, i.e., the descendants of al-Hārith bin Ka'b (Arethas in Greek sources), after the name of the Christian ruler executed during the Himyarite persecution.

Najrān became an active trade centre again, halfway between [Mecca](#) and Yemen, headed by a triumvirate described in the delegation of the Christians of Najrān coming to [Muhammad](#) at [Medina](#) ca. 631–2 (Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*: 573), which included a governor, a tribal chief, and a bishop.

During the caliphate of 'Umar, the Monophysites were expelled and settled at Najrāniyya, near al-Kufa (Iraq) (Robin 2008). By the eleventh century, the ancient city of Najrān, today al-Ukhdūd, had fallen into ruins. The main settlement shifted to the left bank of the wādī, where the modern city of Najrān is located. Jewish and Christian communities settled there until at least the early thirteenth century (Ibn al-Mujāwir, *Ta'rikh al-Mustabsir*: 209).

## Jérémie Schiettecatte

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Alternate spellings: Najrān, Najran, Nagrān, Nagrān, Nagran, al-Ukhdūd, al-Ukhdūd, Ukhdud, Zīrbān, Zīrbān, Zurbān, Zirban, Zrbn, *Srbn*, *Ngrn*

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