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## Saba<sup>3</sup>

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## Investigating and mapping Ancient Arabia

[DICTIONARY](#)[SCOPE](#)[USER  
GUIDE](#)[EDITORIAL  
STAFF](#)[AUTHORS](#)

[Home](#) / [Projects](#) / [Thematic Dictionary of Ancient Arabia](#) / [Table of contents](#) / [Saba'](#)

### SABA'

*Saba', tribe settled in the central lowlands of Yemen, which evolved into the Sabaeen kingdom in the early 1st mill. BCE. Its centre was the oasis of Ma'rib. The constituents of Sabaeen identity were the use of Sabaic, a Semitic language written in the South Semitic alphabet, and the worshipping of the god Almaqah, tutelary deity of its pantheon.*

#### Saba' — a kingdom

For most of the 1st millennium BCE, the [tribe](#) of Saba' (Sab. *S<sup>1</sup>b<sup>3</sup>*; Ar. *Saba'*) is indissociable from the kingdom of Saba'. Saba' appears in the early South Arabian epigraphical records from the 8th cent. BCE onwards. Centred around the cities of [Ma'rib](#) (*Mryb*) and [Ṣirwāḥ](#) (*Ṣrwh*), its territory extended to the Wādī al-Juba to the south and the Wādī Raghwān and [Wādī al-Jawf](#) to the north, in the inner lowlands of Yemen.

The Sabaeans soon gained ascendancy over the competing South Arabian kingdoms and played a prominent part in the development of the trans-Arabian [caravan trade](#), in alliance with the North Arabian people from [Taymā'](#) (Job 6:19; Cavigneaux & Ismail *BaM* 21: text n. 2). After Tiglatpileser III had eliminated the Aramean states and annexed Damascus, [aromatics](#) conveyed by Sabaeen caravans flowed into [Mesopotamia](#), through the Southern Levant (Jer 6:20, Is 60:6), trade being secured by a tribute paid to the [Assyrian kings](#) (ARAB I 778, 799). The royal inscriptions of Sargon II (late 8th cent. BCE) mention the tribute brought by It'amra/Ithamar the Sabaeen (ARAB II 18, 55); those of Sennacherib (early 7th cent. BCE) the tribute of Karibi-ilu king of Saba (ARAB II 440). They are respectively identified as [Yatha'amar Watār](#) and [Karib'il Watār](#), mukarribis [federators] of Saba', based on the accounts of their reigns found in the [temple of Almaqah](#) in Ṣirwāḥ ([DAI Ṣirwāḥ 2005-50](#); [RES 3945](#)). They were both town builders who fortified cities, and gained control over most of South Arabia thanks to a network of tribal alliances, tribal brotherhood, and extensive conquests (Nebes 2016).

After the end of the 6th century BCE, Saba' shrank to its initial core, from Ma'rib and Ṣirwāḥ to [al-Baydā'](#) (ancient Nashq), in the central lowlands of Yemen, as a repercussion of the rise of the competing kingdoms of [Qatabān](#) and [Hadramawt](#) ([MuB 673](#)), and the rivalry of caravans from the kingdom of [Ma'in](#) ([B-L Nashq](#); [RES 3022](#)). The rulers lost the title of mukarrib, replaced by that of king (*mlk*), and their inscriptions are limited to the commemoration of religious and hydraulic constructions ([Ja 551](#); [RES 3903](#)). Significantly, in his account of the Roman military expedition led by [Aelius Gallus](#) in South Arabia (26/25 BCE), [Strabo](#) (*Geog. 16, 4, 24*) does not even mention the name of Saba'; the Sabaeen king is described as the ruler of the Rhammanites, from the tribe of [Raymān](#), a fraction of Saba'. A few years later, the growing kingdom of [Himyar](#) seized control of the kingdom of Saba' for the first time. After this unification, the Himyarite kings held the title of

#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

◀	<a href="#">A</a>	<a href="#">B</a>	<a href="#">C</a>	<a href="#">D</a>	<a href="#">E</a>	<a href="#">F</a>	<a href="#">G</a>	<a href="#">H</a>	
–	<a href="#">I</a>	<a href="#">J</a>	<a href="#">K</a>	<a href="#">L</a>	<a href="#">M</a>	<a href="#">N</a>	<a href="#">O</a>	<a href="#">P</a>	<a href="#">Q</a>
R	<a href="#">S</a>	<a href="#">T</a>	<a href="#">U</a>	<a href="#">V</a>	<a href="#">W</a>	<a href="#">X</a>	<a href="#">Y</a>	<a href="#">Z</a>	

[SHOW ALL CONTENT](#)

Search



#### SECTIONS IN THIS ENTRY

- [Saba' — a kingdom](#)
- [Saba' — a tribe](#)
- [Saba' in the Bible](#)
- [Saba' in the Koran and Ibn al-Kalbī's genealogy](#)
- [Confusions](#)
- [References and suggested reading](#)

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'king of Saba' and dhu-Raydān'. This subjugation lasted more than a century (see [Peripl. M. Rubr.](#) 23). During most of the 2nd cent. CE, tribal rulers (*qayl*) from the northern highlands of Yemen disputed the title of 'king of Saba' and dhu-Raydān' with the Himyarites (Bron 2002; Arbach et al. 2020). From ca. 160 CE onwards, these tribal rulers instigated a Sabaeen Renaissance dominated by highland tribes. The kings came from the highland tribes ([Radmān-and-Khawlān](#); [Ghaymān](#); [Hāshid](#) and [Ḥumlān](#)), and the counterpart of Ma'rib, the city of [San'ā'](#) (*Ṣn'w*) rose to the rank of second capital on the highlands. After final confrontations in ca. 270-75 CE ([MAFRAY-al-Mi'sal 5](#), [CIH 353](#)), and despite the resistance of the Sabaeen aristocracy (Arbach & Schiettecatte 2015), Ḥimyar eventually took over Saba'. This annexation marks the final end of a Sabaeen political entity. The name of Saba' lived on until the mid-6th cent. CE in the title borne by the Himyarite sovereign (king of Saba', dhu-Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt and Yamanat), contributing to its legitimacy. It also survived in the name of the tribe Saba' Kahlān, the tribe of the inhabitants of Ma'rib (see below).

## Saba' — a tribe

As its territory expanded, the community of Saba' soon evolved into a confederation of [tribes](#) organized into a hierarchy, the kingdom of Saba'. However, throughout the 1300 years of its existence (ca. 800 BCE – 600 CE), within the Sabaeen kingdom, Saba' itself designated a changing reality (Robin 1996).

At the time of the mukarribs of Saba' (8th-6th cent. BCE), Saba' was a community made up of the dominant clans mainly settled in [Marib](#), along the course of the Wādī Dhana and its surroundings, with [Almaqah](#) as its tutelary deity. It also designated the territory of this political entity (Robin 1996: 1091–95). A pact of union claimed under the aegis of the god ['Athtar](#) dhu-Dibān, in the temple of [Jabal al-Lawdh](#), united this community of Saba' with the other constituents of the Sabaeen state (Robin 1996: 1095–1096).

From the 5th century BCE onwards, Sabaeen domination over South Arabia ceased and Saba' lost its paramount position. It was progressively relegated to the role of a standard tribe, Saba'-and-[Fayshān](#), in a federation of tribes composing the kingdom (e.g., [RES 2980 bis](#): *'s<sup>2</sup>b S<sup>1</sup>b'*, "the tribes of Saba'"). The other prominent constituents of this federation included [Ṣirwāh](#) (e.g., [RES 3951](#)), [Bakīl](#) (e.g., [CIH 126](#)), and [Samī](#) (e.g., [RES 4176](#)). The tribe of Saba'-and-Fayshān was headed by a king (*mlk*); the other tribes recognized the authority of a *qayl* (tribal leader) who pledged allegiance to the king. The tribe of Saba'-and-Fayshān probably corresponded to the gathering of the old Sabaeen aristocracy, Saba', settled in Marib (Ma'rib), Nashq (al-Bayḍā') and Nashshān ([al-Sawdā'](#)), and the other subjects, Fayshān, mostly settled in parts of the highlands, not subjected to the authority of a *qayl*, i.e., mostly [Ṣan'ā'](#) and its surroundings (Robin 1996: 1102).

From the 1st cent. CE onwards, the nisba 'Sabaeans' (*Asbū'ān*, *'s<sup>1</sup>b<sup>n</sup>*, e.g., [CIH 599](#), [Ja 643](#)) also appears to refer to the old Sabaeen aristocracy (Robin 1996: 1105).

After the annexation of the kingdom of Saba' by Ḥimyar, in ca. 275 CE, Saba' lost its royal status. From then on, the tribe is most often named Saba' Kahlān (*S<sup>1</sup>b' Kh<sup>l</sup>n*, e.g., [Ja 653](#)). It was limited to the community of free citizens of the city of Marib (actual Ma'rib): "the tribe of Saba', the inhabitants of (the town of) Marib" ([I R 32](#): *s<sup>2</sup>b<sup>n</sup> S<sup>1</sup>b' 'b' l Mrb*; [RES 3910](#): *s<sup>2</sup>bn S<sup>1</sup>b' 'b' l hgrn Mrb*).

The final mention of Saba' in the South Arabian sources is in the royal inscription of [Abraha](#) in Ma'rib ([CIH 541](#)), when the inhabitants of the [oasis](#) called on the king for help after the rupture of the [Marib dam](#).

## Saba' in the Bible

In the [Bible](#), Sheba is a region associated with [Dedān](#) (Gn. x, 7; xxv, 3; I Ch i, 9, 32), [Tēmā'](#) (Jb vi, 19) and Ra'mah (Ez xxvii, 22 – see [Ragmat](#)), or a kingdom headed by a [queen](#) (I R x, 1-13; II Ch ix, 1-12 – see [Queen of Sheba](#)). It traded [gold](#) and [aromatics](#) (Ez xxvii, 22; I R x, 2, 10, Ps lxxii, 15, Jr vi, 20; Is lx, 6) by means of [caravans](#) (Is lx, 6; Jb vi, 19; I R x, 2) (Briend 1996).

Although the Bible never precisely locates Sheba, there is no doubt that it corresponds to the South Arabian caravan kingdom of Saba', considering the association of Taymā' and Saba' in Assyrian sources (Cavigneaux & Ismail *BaM* 21: text n. 2; ARAB I 799), of Saba' and Dadan in the Sabaic inscription [B-L Nashq](#) and the destruction of Ragmat by Saba' in the [Sabaic](#) inscription [RES 3943](#).

## Saba' in the Koran and Ibn al-Kalbī's genealogy

The testimony of Saba' appears twice in the Koran: implicitly in Sūra 27 where the visit of a queen to king Solomon is deemed to be that of the queen of Saba' by drawing a parallel with the Old Testament; and explicitly in Sūra 34 entitled Saba', alluding to the prosperity of the [oasis](#) of Ma'rib and referring to the rupture of its [dam](#).

In the work of the genealogist Ibn al-Kalbī, Saba' is the third descendant of [Qaḥṭān](#), the ancestor of the Southern Arabs (Caskel 1966 I: tab. 176, II: 31). The filiation of Saba' includes Kahlān, the former epithet of the tribe of Saba' (late 3rd–early 6th cent. CE), Raydān, the former lineage of the Himyarite kings mentioned in the royal title (1st–6th cent. CE), and Ḥimyar, who is no more than an ancestor among others. The genealogy does not reflect the paramount role of this kingdom on the eve of Islam. This genealogical work is an allegorical construction defining ties between distant ancestors on the basis of the vague recollection of former geographical proximities and political alliances (Robin 2013: 215–216).

## Confusions

It is highly unlikely that Saba' can be identified with the biblical Seba (Gn x, 7; Is xlili, 3; xlv, 14), written with a *samech*, and not a *šin*. This latter region is located in the south of Egypt (Briend 1996).

In the same way, Sabaeans should not be confused with the religious communities of the Sabians of Southern Iraq or with the Sabians of Harran, a transcription of the Arabic *ṣābi'ūn* which derives from *ṣabā* ("to turn towards"), with a *ṣād*, and not a *sīn*.


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