

## A likely identification of “Sambrachate, and a homonymous city on the continent” (Pliny, *Natural history*, VI, 151)

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In his description of the Arabian Peninsula, Pliny the Elder mentions a port and a homonymous island named “Sambrachate” between Canauna (today al-Qunfudha) and Acila (on the Strait of Bāb al-Mandab) on the southern coast of the modern Red Sea. The ethnonym “Shabraqatān” found in a South Arabian (Sabaeen) inscription from the region of Ṣa‘da in Yemen makes it possible to locate the port Sambrachate in the bay of Jāzān (or Jīzān) and to identify Sambrachate island with one of the islands of the Farasān archipelago.

*Dans sa description de la péninsule Arabique, Plin l’Ancien mentionne un port et une île homonyme nommés « Sambrachate » entre Canauna (aujourd’hui al-Qunfudha) et Acila (sur le détroit de Bāb al-Mandab) sur le littoral méridional de la mer Rouge actuelle. L’ethnonyme « Shabraqatān » relevé dans une inscription sudarabique (sabéenne) de la région de Ṣa‘da au Yémen permet de localiser le port Sambrachate dans la baie de Jāzān (ou Jīzān) et d’identifier l’île Sambrachate avec l’une des îles de l’archipel des Farasān.*

The description of Arabia that can be found in Pliny’s *Natural history* is particularly disturbing because, among the listed place names, very few have been precisely identified.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore of interest to identify one more of them in the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula.

### Pliny’s text: Sambrachate, an island and a city

We are dealing here with Sambrachate,<sup>2</sup> mentioned in a long list of place names and ethnonyms, in Book VI of *Natural history*:

{150}. [...] Then Clari, the coast of the Mamaei where there are gold mines, the land of Canauna, the tribes of the Apitami, the Casani, the island Devade, the Coralis source, the Carphati, the Alaea islands, Amnanethus, the tribe of the Darae; {151}. The Chelonitis islands, the ones of the Ichtyophagi, very many, deserted Odanda, Basa, the many islands of the Sabaeans, the rivers Thanar, Amnum, the Doric islands, the Daulotos and Dora sources, the islands of Pteros, Labatanis, Coboris, Sambrachate, and a homonymous city on the continent. To the South, many islands the largest of which is Camari, the Museros river, the port of Laupas; the Sabaeen *Scenitae*, numerous islands, their outpost Acila from where one navigates to India (Pliny, *Natural history*, VI, 150-151 [from a French translation by Desanges forthcoming]).

1. For an inventory of these place names, refer to Maps 4 (Arabia-Azania) and 83 (Nabataea meridional), in the *Barrington Atlas* (Talbert 2000) and to the explanatory notes by D.T. Potts (2000) and D.F. Graf (2000).
2. Moritz 1920, “Sambracate”. See also Robin 2019 for a more detailed commentary on the South Arabian epigraphic data.

According to this text, Sambrachate is an island, with a homonymous city on the continent. It is possible to pinpoint the area where one can locate the island and the city, thanks to three neighbouring place names, listed from north to south, which are identified quite securely, or at least in very probable manner:

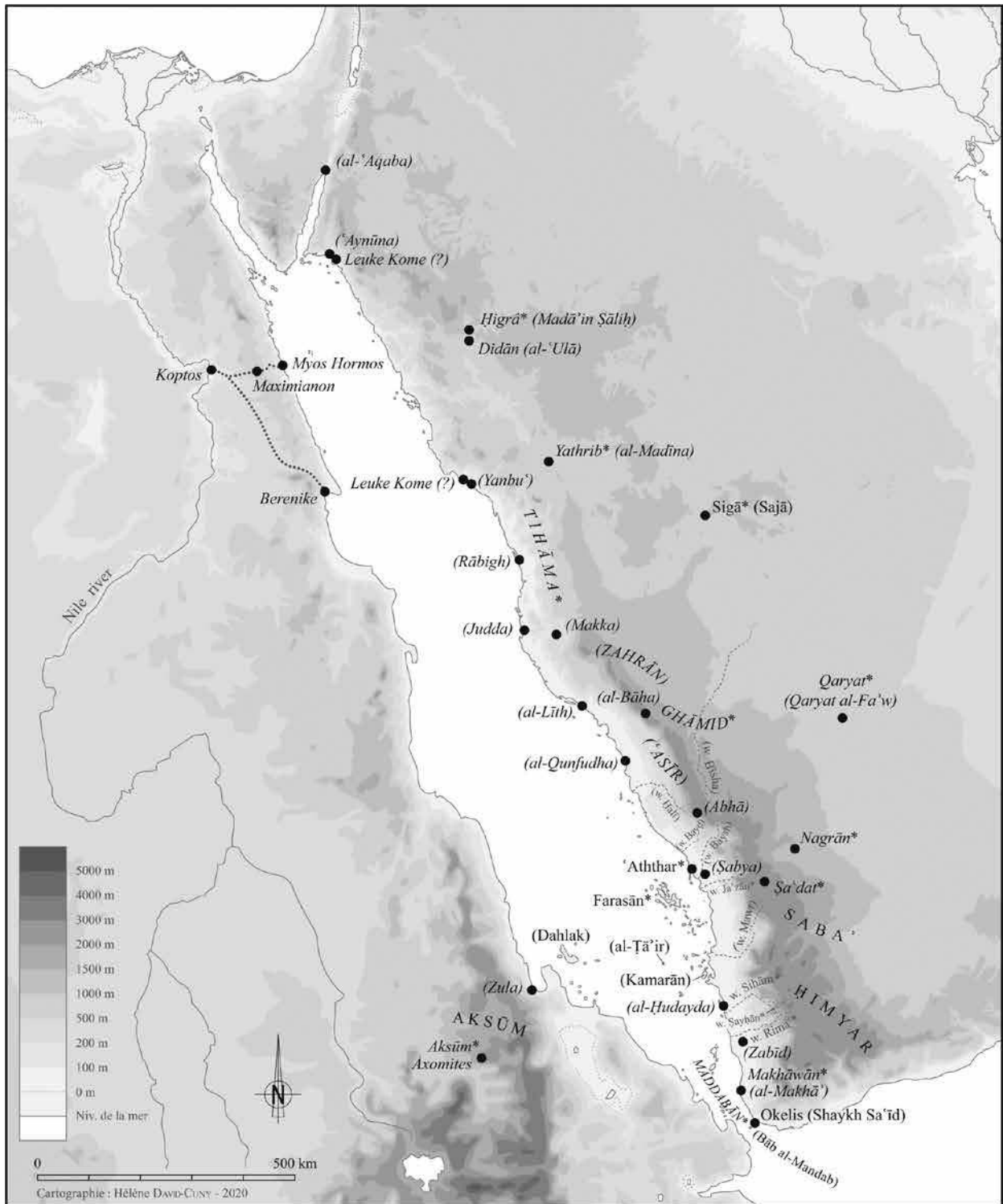
- *regio Canauna* (fig. 1):<sup>3</sup> *Canauna* is the ancient name of the port of al-Qunfudha, 750 km north-northwest of the Bāb al-Mandab strait, halfway between Judda and Jāzān (or Jīzān); the Latin *Canauna* can indeed be identified with the Arabic place name Qanawnā (or Qanawna) mentioned in the medieval sources and still in existence today in the name of a wādī that flows into the Red Sea at al-Qunfudha; his identification is secure, since it is based on a sequence of four Semitic consonants that all have a single correspondence in Latin;<sup>4</sup>
- *Camari* (fig. 1):<sup>5</sup> according to Pliny, *Camari* is the largest of a series of many islands; nowadays, among the “many islands” of the southern Arabian coastline, the largest is surely Great Farasān (Farasān al-kabīr), in the Farasān archipelago, off the coast of Jāzān; one then also finds Kamarān, near the coast, 65 km to the northwest of al-Hudayda, and two islands of the Ḥanīsh archipelago, at the latitude of Zabīd, in the middle of the Red Sea; the identification of *Camari* with Kamarān (108 km<sup>2</sup>) is very likely for two reasons; the first is the similarity between the two names; the second is the importance given to it by the Yemeni scholar al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī (d. after 970) in his *Description of the Arabian Peninsula*;<sup>6</sup> the Latin name *Camari*, however, is not a regular transcription of Kamarān, that should be “Chamari”;
- *Acila* (fig. 1):<sup>7</sup> *Acila* is the stopover in the Bāb al-Mandab strait from where one would sail to India; Pliny also calls it *Ocelis* and *Ocilia*;<sup>8</sup> it is located on the Arabian shore of the strait, probably in the bay now called al-Shaykh Sa‘īd, which provides the best haven.<sup>9</sup>

Sambrachate is therefore surely located between al-Qunfudha (Canauna) and the Bāb al-Mandab strait (Acila), and probably between al-Qunfudha (Canauna) and Kamarān (Camari).

Sambrachate, the thus named “homonymous city”, is not just any ordinary town: it is a “maritime city” which has given its name to one of the myrrh species, “Sambracene”, listed in Book XII of *Natural history*:

There are many numerous species: wild types of myrrh, the first of which is Troglodyte [*Trogodytica*]; then comes the Minaean [*Minaea*], which includes the Atramitic [*Atramitica*], the Gebbanitic [*Gebbanitica*] and the Ausarite [*Ausaritis*] in the kingdom of the Gebbanites [*Gebbanitarum regno*]; and thirdly the Dianite [*Dianitis*]; fourthly the myrrh for collection; fifthly, the Sambracene [*Sambracena*], named after a maritime city of the kingdom of the Sabaeans [*regni Sabaeorum*]; and sixthly, the Duserite [*Duseritim*]. There is also a white myrrh, found in only one place, which is gathered in the place of Mesala. Troglodytic can be recognized by its smoothness, by its more arid, dirty and barbaric aspect, but it is more penetrating than the others. The Sambracene, named above, is the most pleasing to the eye, but it has few strengths (Pliny, *Natural history*, XII, 69, transl. Ernout 1949).

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3. Müller 1899, “Canauna”; Muller 1882, Map VII. Sinus Arabici pars media Regio Canuna; *Barrington Atlas*, Talbert 2000, Map 4 (Arabia-Azania), B2 (Canauna); Wissmann 1976, Abb. 1 between the pp. 312 and 313 (Qanauna).
  4. The Semitic *qāf* is normally transliterated by the Greek *kappa* (and by a *c* in Latin), while the *kāf* usually appears as a *chi* in Greek (and in Latin as the group of letters *ch*), see Rodinson 1970.
  5. Müller 1897, “Camari 1”; Moritz 1919, “Kamaroi”; Muller 1882, Map VIII. Sinus Arabici pars meridionalis, and detail Map (Camari I.); *Barrington Atlas*, Talbert 2000, Map 4 (Arabia-Azania), B2 (Camarum).
  6. Al-Hamdānī, *Ṣifa*, p. 52, line 18 (transl. Forrer 1942, p. 37). See also al-Hamdānī, *Ṣifa*, p. 52, line 12, and p. 119, line 19.
  7. Grohmann 1937, “Ocelis”; Muller 1882, Map VIII. Sinus Arabici pars meridionalis, and detail Map (Ocelis, Acila); *Barrington Atlas*, Talbert 2000, Map 4 (Arabia-Azania), B3 (Akila/Okelis); Wissmann 1976, Abb. 1 between the pp. 312 and 313 (Akīla).
  8. *Ocelis* (Pliny, *Natural history*, VI, 104, twice); *Ocilia* (Pliny, *Natural history*, XII, 88); *Okēlis* in Greek, in *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, § 25 and 26.
  9. H. Rackham distinguishes *Acila* (Pliny, *Natural history*, VI, 151 which he identifies with “Kalhat” = Qalhāt, an Omani port) and *Ocelis* (Pliny, *Natural history*, VI, 104, twice, which he translates by Cella); in Pliny, *Natural history*, XII, 88, he keeps *Ocilia* in the English version.



**La mer Rouge vers l'époque de Pline (carte © HC & ChJR, 2020)**

**Conventions :**

Romains minuscules : lieu-dit, cours d'eau

Italiques minuscules : bourgade

ROMAINS MAJUSCULES : royaume

ITALIQUES MAJUSCULES : région

... : nom antique grec

...\* : nom antique en langue locale

(...) : nom médiéval ou moderne

(*'Aynūna*)

*Berenike*

*Nagrān\**

(w. Baysh)

Rima\*<sup>1</sup>

(*'ASĪR*)

AKSŪM

GHĀMĪD\*

Bourgade moderne

Bourgade antique connue en grec

Bourgade antique dans la langue locale

Cours d'eau, nom moderne

Lieu-dit antique dans la langue locale

Région moderne

Royaume

Région antique dans la langue locale

Fig. 1 – The Red Sea around the time of Pliny (H. Cuvigny, C.J. Robin; cartography: H. David-Cuny).

There is little doubt that the “maritime city of the kingdom of the Sabaeans”, from which the myrrh *Sambracena* (variant *Sembracena*) takes its name, is called Sambracate. Its identification with “the homonymous city [of Sambrachate Island] on the continent” is highly probable: the two cities, which are ports in southern Arabia, share the same rich and rather rare sequence of four consonants. It therefore appears that Sambrac(h)ate is not only an island, with “a homonymous city on the continent”, but also a port for the export of myrrh. Unfortunately, this additional clarification does not allow a more precise location for Sambrac(h)ate, because the locations in Arabia during Antiquity of the two myrrh producing areas mentioned by Pliny are not precisely defined.

There is no other text that mentions Sambrac(h)ate. Consequently, to locate the island and the port, one can only base oneself on Pliny’s very vague topographical data and on modern place names that may have preserved the Semitic version of the ancient name. Three locations have been suggested. The first two derive from topographical data that imply an island and a site between al-Qunfudha and al-Ḥudayda. Aloys Sprenger has thus suggested one of the Farasān Islands (the Small Farasān) and Jāzān,<sup>10</sup> while Eduard Glaser has favoured al-Luḥayya,<sup>11</sup> slightly to the south, the port through which Niebuhr’s expedition had landed in Yemen in the 18th century. Sprenger and Glaser even felt authorized to reconstruct a Semitic root from Latin, an exercise much favoured by German and Austrian scholars of Antiquity until the 1950s. They hence supposed that Sambrac(h)ate was derived from a place name formed on the root ShMRKh.

The third proposal – by the German geographer Hermann von Wissman – was based on a very vague phonetic resemblance of “Sambrac(h)ate” with the region of “Shamīr” in the vicinity of Zabīd (in the south of the Yemeni Tihāma).<sup>12</sup> This suggestion is, however, quite “unconvincing”,<sup>13</sup> since Shamīr is to the south of al-Ḥudayda, and therefore to the south of Camari.

## A South Arabian ethnonym, Shabraqatān

A more precise identification of Sambrac(h)ate can be nowadays put forward, thanks to an ethnonym, very similar to Sambrac(h)ate, that can be read in a Sabaean South Arabian inscription. The latter was discovered in 1973, but the association with Sambrac(h)ate had hitherto not been made. The inscription is located in the middle of the large Umm Laylā Ottoman fortress, 55 km to the northwest of Ṣa‘da, some twenty kilometres from the Saudi border, in the far north of Yemen, at an elevation of 2,400 m above sea level (fig. 2).

The large Umm Laylā inscription (fig. 3), which dates to the second half of the 2nd century AD, is carved on a rock at the edge of a ramp inside the site’s citadel:

Assembly and plenary meeting of the commune of Khawlān Gudādān, comprising the Aḥnūb, the A‘būs, the *Ys<sup>2</sup>bmt* and their protégés, and of the communes Abqūrān and Shabraqatān. They have agreed and committed to fight the Abyssinians who landed in their country, with the support of their gods ‘Athtar dhu-Raḥb<sup>um</sup>, ‘Athtar dhu-Ḥadrān, ‘Athtar dhu-Kabdān and Laḥay‘athat god of Khaṣūfān, and with the support of their lords the kings of Saba’ and the banū Sukhaym<sup>um</sup>, and in execution of the order of their lords. And they have completed the two basins Yaghīl and Hīrrān.

*’tm w-gm s<sup>2</sup>’b<sup>n</sup> Ḥwl<sup>n</sup> G<sup>(2)</sup>dd<sup>n</sup> ’hnb<sup>n</sup>-w-’bs<sup>ln</sup> w-Ys<sup>2</sup>bm<sup>(3)</sup>’<sup>n</sup> w-kl wlyt-hmw w-s<sup>2</sup>’b<sup>n</sup> (4) ’bqr<sup>n</sup> w-S<sup>2</sup>brqt<sup>n</sup> s’twddw (5) w-s’tḏlln l-tṣn ’n bn-Ḥbs<sup>2n</sup> l-(6)mz’ w ’rd-hmw b-mqm ’l-h<sup>(7)</sup>mw ’ttr ḏ-Rḥb<sup>m</sup> w-’ttr ḏ-Ḥ<sup>(8)</sup>ḏr<sup>n</sup> w-’ttr ḏ-Kbd<sup>n</sup> w-Lḥy<sup>(9)</sup>’ttr ’lh-Ḥṣf<sup>n</sup> w-b-mqm ’mr<sup>(10)</sup>’-hmw ’mlk S’b’ w-bny S’ḥy<sup>(11)</sup>m<sup>n</sup> w-ght ’mr’-hmw wfy<sup>m</sup> w-(12)s’tqḥw krfy<sup>n</sup> Yḡl w-Hr<sup>n</sup>*

10. Sprenger 1875, p. 252, § 383.

11. Glaser 1890, pp. 33, 38-39.

12. Wissmann 1957, p. 308, n. 67, who suggests recognizing a Semitic “Shamīr (al-)Khatī (?)” as the basis for Latin *Sambrachate*, and the map facing p. 324 (Shamir, Sambrachate). See also the maps Wissmann 1968, Karte III (Sambrachatē, Šamīr Ḥatī); Wissmann 1970, “Ophir”, Abb. 1, col. 909-910 (Šamīr Ḥatī) and Abb. 3, col. 919-920 (Sambrachatē, Šamīr); Wissmann 1976, Abb. 1 between the pp. 312 and 313 (Sambrachatē) and 21, p. 397 (Sambrachate Shamīr Khatī).

13. Cohen, Rodinson 1965, p. 134, in the commentary on the South Arabian rock inscription Ry 507.



Fig. 2 – The fortress built by the Ottomans at Umm Laylā in the north of Yemen (C.J. Robin 1973).

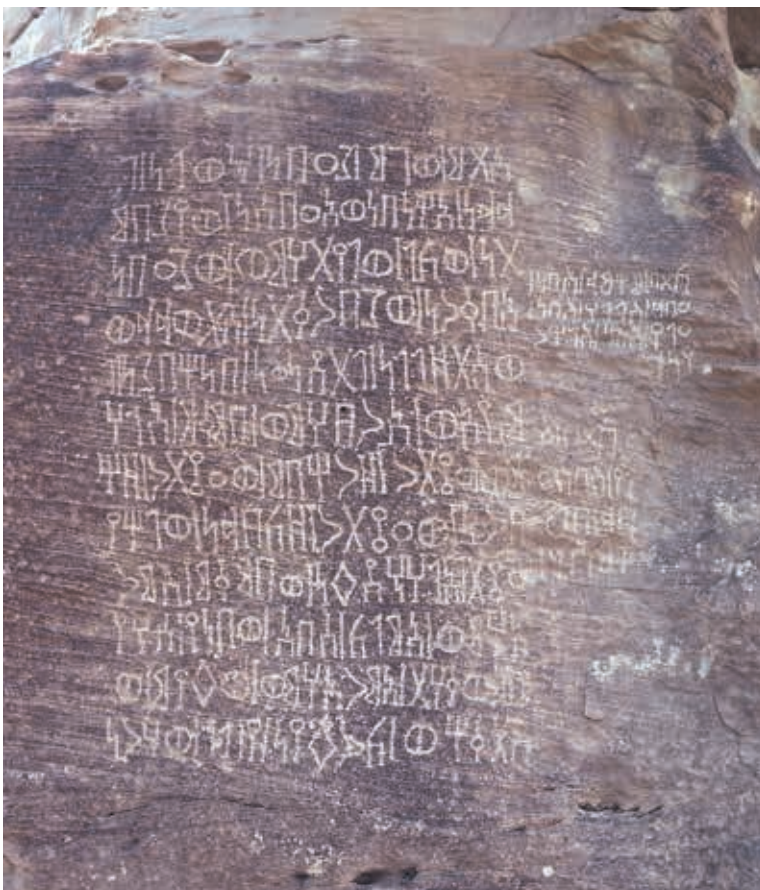


Fig. 3 – The Umm Laylā inscription that proclaims the creation of a tribal alliance to resist the Abyssinian invasion, in the second half of the 2nd century AD, perhaps more precisely between 160 and 190; this alliance united the communes Khawlān, Abqūrān and Shabraqtān (C.J. Robin 1973).

Three ancient communes (*s<sup>2</sup> b*, *sha 'b*) are called Khawlān.<sup>14</sup> The one mentioned here is the northern Khawlān, distinguished from its homonyms by the apposition of Gudādān, the lineage name of its chiefs. The text, in exceptional fashion, enumerates the groups making up Khawlān: these are three branches, the Aḥnūb, the A'būs, the *Ys<sup>2</sup>bmt*, and all their protégés.

“The commune Abqūrān and Shabraqatān” is an abbreviated form of “the commune Abqūrān and the commune Shabraqatān”: compare with “with the support of their god(s) ‘Athtar dhu-Raḥb<sup>um</sup>, ‘Athtar dhu-Ḥadrān, ‘Athtar dhu-Kabdān and Laḥay‘athat god of Khaṣūfān, with the first noun “god” in the singular, applying to the four terms of the enumeration.

The banū Sukhaym<sup>um</sup> are the princes of the commune Yarsum to the northeast of Ṣan‘ā’: they are habitually the representatives of the king of Saba’ in the commune of Khawlān.<sup>15</sup> The “Abyssinians” are the Aksūmites (the subjects of the kingdom of Aksūm in Africa, spanning part of both modern Ethiopia and Erythrea).

The Umm Laylā inscription celebrates the foundation of a tribal alliance whose goal is to oppose the Abyssinians who have recently arrived in the land. One could suppose that it summarizes a detailed document, written on a perishable material, which precisely fixed the list of contracting parties, as well as their obligations and rights. Its function was to give the alliance, concluded at the instigation of the lords and with the agreement of the king of Saba’, a public and irrevocable character.

This document is the only one of this type known in Arabian epigraphy. It can be compared with the Yathrib Document, i.e. the pact that Muḥammad son of ‘Abd Allāh, the prophet of Islam, concluded with the tribes of the oasis of Yathrib (then renamed Medina) during his installation in the oasis at the end of the summer of 622.<sup>16</sup>

The two contracting parties are:

- the commune Khawlān Gudādān (the official name of northern Khawlān);
- the communes Abqūrān and Shabraqatān.

Khawlān, the great commune of northern Yemen, whose main city was Ṣa‘ datum (today Ṣa‘ da), still exists today, under the same name and with same territory. The survival of a tribal name over some 2,000 years is not something rare in Yemen, where there are more than twenty examples;<sup>17</sup> yet this is a very exceptional phenomenon in the world. Such stability, however, is more apparent than real: the sources reveal that the internal structure of Khawlān radically changed between Antiquity and the 10th century and again between the 10th and 20th century.<sup>18</sup>

That said, it is not Khawlān that is of interest here, but Abqūrān and Shabraqatān. The Arab-Moslem scholarly tradition recalls that, in the 10th century AD, al-Abqūr (the Arabic form of Sabaic Abqūrān) was a tribal group settled in the Umm Laylā region. It is probable that nine centuries earlier Abqūrān was the Umm Laylā commune. From the viewpoint of its grammatical form, al-Abqūr is the plural of the “relative adjective” (in Arabic *nisba*) *bāqirī*.<sup>19</sup>

As concerns Shabraqatān (a noun whose vocalization is conventional), it is a tribal name that is only attested in the Umm Laylā inscription. It seems to have disappeared after the advent of Islam, since the Arab-Moslem traditionists do not mention it. In order to pinpoint it, the clues at our disposal are tenuous.

14. For the ancient ethnonyms and toponyms of southern Arabia, see the map Robin, Brunner 1997.

15. Robin 2014.

16. Lecker 2004.

17. Robin 2013, p. 141 (for the most noteworthy).

18. Robin 2020.

19. Robin 2014, pp. 165-166.

As the communal assembly of Umm Laylā is organizing the resistance to the intrusions of an enemy that is apparently African and seaborne, it is plausible that, among the two contracting parties, some are populations of the Arabian coastline, who are evidently those most directly threatened. A small clue suggests this is precisely the case for Shabraqātān.

The Umm Laylā text lists six tribal groups who had a stake in the alliance, and it then invokes four gods who are obviously the four great gods of these tribal groups. The fact that the number of communes is different from that of the gods slightly complicates the recognition of the god corresponding to each commune. This difficulty, however, does not concern the first and last commune, who certainly worship the first and last god. The great god of Shabraqātān is therefore most certainly "Laḥay'athat god of Khaṣūfān".

Now, Khaṣūfān (Arabic al-Khaṣūf) is a location on the coastal plain, at the foot of the Yemeni mountain range, whose identification is approximately known: it lies to the west of Khawlān, 70 km to the southwest of Umm Laylā and 70 km to the east-southeast of Jāzān.<sup>20</sup> It is probably in this area that one must search for Shabraqātān.<sup>21</sup>

If indeed Khaṣūfān depended on Shabraqātān in the 2nd century AD, this was no longer the case in the 10th century: the tribe that then dominated the region of Jāzān was called Ḥakam.<sup>22</sup>

The date of the Umm Laylā inscription can be found thanks to several clues (provided by palaeography and institutional history);<sup>23</sup> it is somewhere in the second half of the 2nd century AD, perhaps more precisely between 160 and 190.

## The likely identification of Sambrac(h)ate with Shabraqātān

If we now return to Pliny's Sambrac(h)ate (*Natural history*, VI, 151, and XII, 69), it appears plausible that the name is derived from the Shabraqātān of the Umm Laylā inscription, for two reasons. The consonant structure of the two names is very similar<sup>24</sup> and the commune of Shabraqātān lies in the area where Pliny locates Sambrac(h)ate, halfway between al-Qunfudha and the island of Kamarān (close to the port of al-Ḥudayda), i.e. in the vicinity of the port of Jāzān (which is located 225 km to the north of al-Ḥudayda and 280 km to the south-southeast of al-Qunfudha).

Two points nevertheless are food for discussion. The *ch* of Sambrachate (Pliny, *Natural history*, VI, 151) is not the regular transcription of the Semitic consonant *qāf*, but that of the *kāf*. The Semitic root corresponding to Sambrachate is therefore ShBRK (and not ShBRQ). One should however notice that Pliny writes "Sambracene [*Sambracena*] (myrrh)" in *Natural history*, XII, 69, with a written form that does indeed correspond to ShBRQ. The hesitation in spelling that one can observe suggests that this caveat is not of paramount importance.

Another point that possibly goes against Sambrac(h)ate's identification with Shabraqātān lies in the fact that these two proper nouns belong to different categories: South Arabian Shabraqātān is an ethnonym, while Latin Sambrac(h)ate is a place name. This objection is not crucial. It is not rare that an Arabian proper noun be used simultaneously as the name of a commune and of a city, above all

20. See the map Robin, Brunner 1997, C/3.

21. On the map Robin, Brunner 1997, Shabraqātān (DE/2-3) has been placed to the east of Ṣa'dat. One must slide it towards the left until reaching Khaṣūfān.

22. Rentz 1965, "Djayzān".

23. Robin 2014, pp. 164-166 and 183.

24. Note, however, that names similar to Sambrac(h)ate are found in India (Herrmann 1920, "Sambracheni", ethnonym), Gaul (Keune 1920, "Sambracitanus sinus"; *Barrington Atlas*, Talbert 2000, Map 16, C3) and Spain (Schulten 1920, "Sambroka"; *Barrington Atlas*, Talbert 2000, Map 25, I3, the river).

in ancient Arabia's desert areas and on South Arabia's margins: one could notably mention Nagrān, Nashshān, Kaminahū, Haram, Širwāḥ or Qanī' in the case of South Arabia and Hagar and Dedān in that of desert Arabia.

Besides, it is not impossible that Shabraqatān is the "relative adjective" (*nisba*) formed on a toponym (which is not attested and whose exact form is unknown), in the plural masculine. A good parallel is offered by Aksūm, name of city and kingdom, whose plural masculine *nisba* is Aksūmān ('*ks'mn*'), "the Aksūmites". Actually, in Umm Laylā's inscription, out of the six ethnonyms (Khawlān, Aḥnūbān, A'būsān, *Ys<sup>2</sup>bmt<sup>n</sup>*, Abqūrān and Shabraqatān), at least three (Aḥnūbān, A'būsān and Abqūrān) are plural masculine *nisba*.

If one accepts the identification of Sambrac(h)ate with the commune Shabraqatān (or with its main city), Sambrac(h)ate is as a result to be looked for in the region of Khaṣūfān, a location 70 km to the east-southeast of Jāzān.

## Sambrac(h)ate the "maritime city"

The connection of the data at our disposal for Shabraqatān's location with Pliny's topographical indications still needs to be done.

Pliny indicates that Sambrac(h)ate is the name of an island and of a homonymous city on the continent. This island apparently belongs to an archipelago. Nowadays, in this section of the Red Sea's coastline between al-Qunfudha and al-Ḥudayda, the only port associated with an archipelago is that of Jāzān (also spelt Jīzān), off whose coast is found the Farasān archipelago, at a distance of some fifty kilometres.

Jāzān, which takes its name from a homonymous wādī (the ancient *G'z'*), is not an ancient port. During the Early Middle Ages, the port was at 'Athr (or 'Aththar), at the northern extremity of the large bay of Jāzān (*bāḥat Jāzān*), at the mouth of the wādī Baysh. 'Athr, which has given its name to a population of lions, "the lions of 'Athr", was then the region's most important town. Its location has been pinpointed thanks to spectacular heaps of pottery dating from the early days of Islam, that I had the opportunity to examine on January 3rd 2019, during my brief participation to the French mission of the Farasān Islands. The distance between Jāzān and 'Athr is around 40 km.

The port's location during Antiquity is unknown. Yet 'Athr is certainly a better candidate than Jāzān.

## Sambrac(h)ate the island

If the port of Sambrac(h)ate is identified with 'Athr, the homonymous island associated with this port is one of the Farasān Islands, probably the largest and the only really inhabited one. The other names given by Pliny – "the islands Pteros, Labatanis, Coboris" –<sup>25</sup> may be the archipelago's other islands or those of islands further to the south. These data could suggest that the archipelago was not yet called "Farasān" at the beginning of the Christian era (the probable date of Pliny's source), but this might be questionable, since a Latin inscription found on the archipelago, going back to the reign of Antoninus Pius, which can be dated to 143-144 AD, mentions a prefect of the *Ferresani*

25. Pteros has been identified with a small island off the land strip closing the bay of Jāzān (Mullerus 1882, Map VII. Sinus Arabici pars media; Treidler 1959, "Pteros"); Labatanis with a group of small islands between Pteros and Coboris (Mullerus 1882, Map VII. Sinus Arabici pars media; see also Sprenger 1875, p. 252, § 383, which puts forward the island called "Loban" 42°15' and 15°50'; Moritz 1924, "Labatanis"); Coboris with the great Farasān (Mullerus 1882, Map VIII. Sinus Arabici pars meridionalis; Sprenger 1875, p. 252, § 383; Müller 1900, "Coboris").



*portus*.<sup>26</sup> The name Farasān also appears in a hagiographic text in Greek of the 6th century AD that mentions "Pharsan" as providing seven ships to help an Aksūmite army cross the Red Sea and invade the kingdom of Himyar.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, once more in the 6th century, the Byzantine ambassador Nonnosos incidentally signals that the last island of "Pharsan" is inhabited by "beings human in shape and appearance, of very small size, black skin, with a thick layer of hair on the entire body".<sup>28</sup>

In the Arabic language, the archipelago still preserves the same name Farasān, in both medieval geographic descriptions and present-day Arabic.

## Sambrac(h)ate and the Sabaean

Pliny also clarifies that the port of Sambrac(h)ate belongs to the "kingdom of the Sabaean" (*Natural history*, XII, 69). The political situation in the region of Sambrac(h)ate in Pliny's time and during the previous centuries is very poorly known, because inscriptions are quite scarce.

One can certainly identify three political entities: Najrān (Amīr), Qaryat (Dhakar), and Khawlān. Two of them, Najrān and Khawlān, are certainly Sabaean in the 2nd century AD. Najrān is not, however, around 25 BC, at the time of Aelius Gallus' expedition.<sup>29</sup> Khawlān's political status at the time is unknown. This is obviously also true of the commune Shabraqatān, which would establish an alliance two centuries later. One must add that from the archaeologist's viewpoint, the Farasān Islands belong without discussion to the cultural sphere of South Arabia, as proven by many South Arabian (probably Sabaean) remains, notably epigraphic ones.<sup>30</sup>

It is therefore not impossible that Shabraqatān was effectively Sabaean in the political sense as Pliny asserts from a source which could be Juba and undoubtedly predates the beginning of the Christian era.

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26. Villeneuve 2004.

27. *Le martyre de Saint Aréthas*, § 29.

28. Photius, *Bibliothèque*, I, § 3.

29. Strabo (*Geography*, 16, 4, 24) indicates that the oasis had a king who fled upon the Romans' arrival.

30. Marion de Procé, Phillips 2010; Marion de Procé 2018, p. 264 and fig. 12.

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