THE ARABS IN ANTIQUITY

Their history from the Assyrians to the Umayyads

Jan Retsö
the last-mentioned region, which would then indicate that they were under Ptolemaic rule or, at least, closely allied with it. North of Auranitis was the region of Damaskēnē, which reveals the Seleucid administrative practice with provincial names in -ēnē. The border thus ran just south of Damascus. These names remained in use into the Roman period and were a memory of the political conditions in the area at the beginning of the Hellenistic era.

The Arabs were well known among homines littérés, as we can see from Hecataeus of Abdera, a writer in the third century BC who wrote a fanciful description of Egypt, the Aegyptiaca, large parts of which are preserved by the diligent Diodorus in the first book of his Bibliotheca.\textsuperscript{80} Most of what this Egyptomaniac told is of highly doubtful historicity and the notices about Arabia have only some value as testimony of a not too sophisticated intellectual's understanding of Arabia from an Egyptian perspective. His Arabia is identical with that of his greater namesake from Ionia 200 years earlier, i.e. Egypt between the Nile and the Red Sea, including the land between the delta and Palestine.\textsuperscript{81}

The Red Sea expedition of Ptolemy II

The Seleucids in Antioch seem to have given up ambitions in southern Syria. Instead they started to increase their influence in the Persian Gulf. It was these activities that induced the second Ptolemy with the name Philadelphus to start an expansionist policy in the Red Sea and north-western Arabia.\textsuperscript{82} As a preparation for a military action in Arabia, Philadelphus sent out an expedition, headed by a certain Ariston, to explore the western coast of Arabia in 280 BC. It is mentioned by later writers like Eratosthenes.\textsuperscript{83} Its importance comes from the fact that substantial parts of the report from the expedition are preserved. The report was used by a second-century writer, Agatharchides from Cnidus, who wrote a book, On the Red Sea, dealing with the history of the Ptolemy, incorporating the description of the Arabian coast in his fifth book. Agatharchides' original text is lost, but extracts and digests of it are found in three later authors: Diodorus Siculus, Strabo and the collection of extracts from ancient literature made by the Byzantine theologian Photius in the ninth century AD.\textsuperscript{84} Of these three witnesses to Agatharchides' work, the Photius text is considered closest to the original. Unfortunately, its author has skipped over many passages; these have to be supplied by Diodorus' fuller version, which, however, is more distant from the original wording. The least important is Strabo, who used an abridgement of Agatharchides made by Artemidorus of Ephesus around 100 BC.\textsuperscript{85}

This complicated textual tradition should be kept in mind when we try to find out what was reported about Arabs in western Arabia around 280 BC. From the three versions we may be able to form an opinion of what Agatharchides wrote, but we should then remember that he was at least one century remote from the text of Ariston. It is wise to adduce the three variants together in the passages relevant for our study:

Diodorus: We shall take up the other part of the opposite shore which leans towards Arabia and start with the innermost recess. This is called Poseideion since Ariston, who was sent out by Ptolemaios to investigate the Arabia stretching as far as the Ocean, founded an altar to Poseidon of the sea.
THE FORGOTTEN ORIGINS

Strabo: He [Artemidorus] returns to the árabes and first he describes those who border on the Arabian Gulf.

Photius: –

Photius’ Bibliotheca has not preserved the introduction to the description of Arabia. In Diodorus and Strabo we find the árabes on the eastern side of the Gulf of Suez.66 We might tentatively recognize the Arabs encountered by Herodotus 200 years earlier.

II

Diodorus: The promontory (akrōtērion) of the island stretching out in front/the promontory stretching out in front of the island lies towards (katà) the so-called ‘Rock’ (pētra) and Palestine. To this, according to report, the Gerrhaeans and the Minaeans bring from what is called Upper Arabia frankincense and the other goods having to do with aromatics.

Strabo: Near the island is a promontory, which stretches towards (pròs) the Rock (pētra) of the árabes called nabataioi and Palestinian country, to which Minaeans and Gerrhaeans and all the neighbouring peoples bring the aromatic goods.

Photius: This ‘duck’ lies close to a promontory richly forested, and it (the ‘duck’) stretches/points, observed in a straight line, towards (pròs) both the so-called ‘Rock’ (pētra) and Palestine, to which Gerrhaeans and Minaeans and all the árabes living nearby bring frankincense, according to report, and the goods having to do with aromatics from the upper country.

This passage has always been taken as evidence of the presence of the Nabataeans at Petra at this time.67 Since, as we have shown, the Nabataeans were not mentioned by Hieronymus of Cardia, and we have evidence from the middle of the third century BC that they were in Hawrān, this passage should be examined closely.

The island mentioned in Diodorus and Strabo has been identified with Tirān at the inlet to the Gulf of ‘Aqabah.68 The promontory has been sought either at Rās al-Qaṣba on the Arabian side or Rās Muhammed on the Sinai peninsula.69 Both these promontories point towards the south, not to the north, which does not help our understanding of the text. The text is, however, not immediately comprehensible in itself and is probably not in good order. Diodorus’ version is the most comprehensible. According to him, the promontory is part of the island, not the opposite mainland, and it is that promontory which points towards Petra and Palestine. Photius says that the island itself points in that direction. Since the Gulf of ‘Aqabah is mentioned immediately afterwards, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the passage is a description of Rās Muhammed, the southernmost tip of the Sinai peninsula.90

If we draw a straight line from there towards Palaistinē, which seems to be a reasonable interpretation of the wording, we do not pass the later Nabataean capital. No one seems to have remembered that Palestine at this time is primarily Philistaea, i.e. the coastal region between Gaza and Jaffa not including Judaea and definitely not Transjordan.91 The ‘rock’, ḥē pētra, should then be somewhere on a line from the inlet
to the Gulf of ḪAqabah to Philistea. Now Hieronymus mentions a rock which, as we have shown above, must be somewhere in the Negev, perhaps identical with Avdat, and which is a habitat of ārabes. This fits, in fact, quite well with what Agatharchides seems to have written. The ārabes living nearby must thus be those mentioned by Hieronymus. We notice that only Strabo, who is the most unreliable of the three, has the phrase ‘the ārabes called nabataiōi’. This phrase occurs in other parts of Diodorus’ book which clearly come from Posidonius. Diodorus does not have the identification with the Nabataeans. Both he and Photius must be considered better witnesses to Agatharchides than Strabo in this passage.

A very important detail in this passage is the expression ‘according to report’ (hōs lōgos). The ‘report’ is obviously about the frankincense traffic of the Minaeans and the Gerrhaeans. Since it is found in both Diodorus and Photius, it is quite certain that it comes from Agatharchides. But it is also fairly certain that it does not come from Aristeon. This expression shows that Agatharchides, in the note about the frankincense traffic, refers to a source different from Aristeon, a source which is closer to his own time. The context also makes it very likely that Agatharchides here has not received his information from Aristeon, who, sailing in the Red Sea and not entering the Gulf of ḪAqabah, is unlikely to have said anything about frankincense traffic through Transjordan and the Negev. We shall return to the dating of this note below.

III

Diodorus: The Laciniiēs Gulf then follows, inhabited by many villages of the ārabes called nabataiōi.

Strabo: Then [comes] the Ailaniēs Gulf and Nabataēa, being a country well populated and with good pastures.

Photius: After the gulf called Laciniiēs, around which ārabes live.

The Licanites/Ailaniēs Gulf is no doubt the Gulf of ḪAqabah. Photius mentions only ārabes living around it. Diodorus has the common phrase identifying Nabataeans as Arabs which, as has been pointed out, probably reflects later times. The ārabes east of the Gulf remind us of the Arabs mentioned in Chronicles against whom king Uzziah fought.

IV

Diodorus: Those who shepherd the country beyond (katā) the gulf who are called Banizomeneis get their food by hunting and eating the meat of the land animals. A very holy sanctuary has been built there, exceedingly revered by all the ārabes.

Strabo: Thereafter [comes] a gulf about five hundred stadia in extent, enclosed by mountains and a mouth difficult to enter. Around it live men hunting land animals. Then [come] three uninhabited islands.

Photius: . . . is the land of Bythmanēoi, a large plain . . . There is a gulf directed to the interior of the land, not more than five hundred stadia deep. Those who
live inside the gulf are called Batmizomaneîs. They are hunters of land animals. After the mentioned land come three islands which form several harbours. Of these they call the first the sanctuary of Isis.

The gulf mentioned by Photius and Strabo is probably the bay at 'Aynûna, beyond which is a large plain and outside of which are several islands. Only Diodorus mentions ārabes and that in a very general way: the sanctuary is revered by all inhabitants of Arabia as he sees it. The other two versions do not mention Arabs, which probably reflects Agatharchides' own text. The Banizomaneîs in Diodorus, and the Bythemanéoi and the Batmizomaneîs in Photius can be suspected to refer to the same entity.97 We have suggested earlier that they are identical with the Amazonîs attacked by king Asa according to the Septuagint, as well as the Alizomaneîs mentioned in the Septuagint in the account of the attack against Jerusalem in the days of king J(eh)oram.98 In the latter story, the LXX also has a variant reading of ārabes: zabmînî which should be compared to Zîmrân, one of the sons of Qeṭurah and brother of Midian. One should also refer to the Mar-sî-ma-nu mentioned by Sargon II in 715 BC together with Ha-a-a-pa and Ta-mu-di [and?] 'the distant ar-ba-a-a'.99 Of the latter three, Hayappa belongs to the Midian of the Old Testament (ʼEphah) and, as is seen from the next paragraph, Thâmîd appears in Agatharchides to be located not far from the Banizomaneîs etc. We would suggest that we have to do with the same entity in the north-western Hîğâz. The ethnography of that area between the end of the eighth and the beginning of the third century BC can thus to some extent be reconstructed from Sargon's annals, the list of Qeṭurah's sons in Genesis, the Book of Chronicles and Agatharchides.

V

Diodorus: This coast is inhabited by the ārabes called Thâmoudênôî.

Strabo: –

Photius: After the separated islands one can see a stony and large shore: this is the land of the Thâmoudênôî ārabes.

The description fits the stony coast between al-Muwaylîh and Ras Karkûma just south of al-Wâgh. Strabo mentions the stony shore but no ethnic names. We see that both Diodorus and Photius identify Thâmîd as ārabes. Before analysing this passage, we should also adduce another coming shortly afterwards:

VI

Diodorus: Those of the ārabes called Débai inhabit the mountainous area . . . The land which comes next is inhabited by ārabes Alîlaiôî and Gâsandôî.

Strabo: After that one comes . . . to a country of nomads . . . They are called Débai; some are nomads and some are farmers.

Photius: The Débai inhabit the area neighbouring the mountainous region;
some are nomads and some are farmers. Their neighbours are Alilaioi and Kasandreis.

The coast described here is identified with the coast of the southern Saudi Arabian Tihāma between al-Qunfudha and al-Baysh. One can observe that the Débai according to Photius inhabit the Tihāma itself, whereas Diodorus locates them in the mountains of Ḥasir. The wording in Strabo supports Photius, and it is much more likely that Ariston had contacts with inhabitants of the coastal region than with the mountain country. Of the others, the Gasandoi/Kasandreis might be connected with the present-day town of Ḥizān just north of the Yemeni border.

Photius does not identify the three following peoples as árabes, which Diodorus does. The epithet árabes given by Photius to the Thamūd would indicate that they had a status similar to Qedar, which, as we have seen, are definitely identified as Arabs. On the other hand, the identification of Thamūd as Arabs also stands isolated in Photius’ text, and given the carelessness with which this term is handled by many ancient writers, let alone copyists, we would like to have some more substantial evidence before acknowledging Thamūd as Arabs. One should not, however, forget the first appearance of Thamūd in a historical document. Sargon’s writers put the expression ‘the distant arba’ya’ just after their name. Does it refer to Thamūd, to all the three peoples mentioned, or to none of them? Meanwhile, there should be no doubt that the Arab identity of the Débai, the Alilaioi and the Gasandoi is the work of Diodorus and not of Agatharchides.

Then there follow sections on South Arabia of which the following are of importance for this study:

VII

Diodorus: After these are the Sabaeans, being the most numerous of the Arabic peoples (arabiké étnei) and inhabiting the Arabia called euðaìmon . . . This tribe [the Sabaeans] surpasses not only the neighbouring árabes but also all other men in wealth.

Strabo: Bordering [upon this region] is the very fertile (euðaimonestaté) [country] of the Sabaeans, a very large tribe (étnei) . . . From their trafficking both the Sabaeans and the Gerrhaeans have become richest of all.

Photius: Just after this comes the people (génoi) of the Sabaeans, the largest of those in (kata) Arabia, possessing all kinds of wealth (euðaimonía) . . . No people seems to be better provided than the Sabaeans and the Gerrhaeans, who profit from all the exceptional things from Europe and Asia.

This passage is quite revealing as far as Diodorus’ method is concerned. Both Strabo and Photius have a wording which is much more original than that of Diodorus. The latter has taken the derivations of euðaimonía, ‘fertile’, ‘wealthy’ etc., and transformed it to a more well-known phrase often used about Arabia in his time. There is no doubt that Strabo and Photius are closer to Agatharchides’ original text than Diodorus’ more watered-down version.

A comparison of the different versions of Agatharchides shows that he originally spoke of Arabs only in the regions around the two northern tips of the Red Sea: just
immediately east of present-day Suez, in the Negev by ‘a rock’ somewhere between the inlet to the Gulf of ‘Aqabah and Philistae, and on the eastern shore of the same Gulf. Thamid remains an uncertain card. The presence of people called Arabs in these three regions is confirmed by other reports, independent of Agatharchides and his source. There is an observable tendency to ‘arabicize’ the other inhabitants of the peninsula in the transmission of Agatharchides’ text, which is evident in the earliest witness, Diodorus. There is, however, no doubt that Photius had a text very close to Agatharchides’ original before him, whereas Diodorus, and, to a lesser degree Strabo, updated the information according to the current ethnic concepts in their own time. Photius gives the impression of being based on a most unprejudiced and matter-of-fact account of conditions in the Red Sea, which, as we know, goes back to or is identical with Aristo’s report of his expedition in 280 BC.

In Photius there is a final important note. In a description of different aromatic plants in South Arabia, one is mentioned which ‘in Arabic’ (arabistt) is called larinma. If this note is original from Agatharchides, it is the earliest reference in history to a language named after Arabs. Unfortunately, it is impossible to identify which language is meant since also the identity of the plant is also uncertain.\(^{102}\) It is tempting to see the initial /l/ as the definite article. This element, which was also documented in Herodotus’ report of the goddess Allat, would make this arabistt refer to an Arabic I-dialect, distinct from the h-dialects documented in the epigraphy.\(^{103}\) To the group of I-dialects also belonged the language visible in the later Nabataean inscriptions and the ‘Arabiyya of the Qur’ân and the old poetry. As we shall soon see, there is another testimony from the third pre-Christian century of an I-dialect in North Arabia.

According to a stele put up by Ptolemy II Philadelphus, a military expedition in the Red Sea was made shortly after Aristo’s expedition.\(^{104}\) The Egyptian interests in north-western Arabia reached Dedan, where at this time a dynasty of rulers called Liyân was established. It has been suggested that the name of the Gulf of ‘Aqabah in Diodorus’ and Photius’ versions of Agatharchides, Laeanites, is in fact the name Liyân, which would testify to the role of the Liyanites in the sea traffic in the northern Red Sea.\(^{105}\) Among their rulers we find the name TLMY, which has been interpreted as a form of Tlemaios, another testimony to the Egyptian connection.

Arabs in Ptolemaic Egypt

From the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus onwards down into the Roman period we have several contemporary documents testifying to the role of Arabs in Egypt. For the first time since the early Achaemenids we have texts which are not transmitted through copyists over many centuries but preserved in their original shape. Most of them are papyri. From these we know that in 259 BC there was already a province, a nomós, named Arabía, established around Wādi Tumaylāt with Pithom/Pathumos as capital under Ptolemy Philadelphus.\(^{106}\) This might be the explanation for a remark made by Egypt’s great Hellenistic historian, Manetho, writing his history of Egypt in the third century BC, thus a contemporary of the Septuagint translators. Josephus quotes a line from his lost work where he told of the Hyksos rulers that some say they were arabes.\(^{107}\) The identification should be explained by the fact that the Hyksos rulers resided in Avaris in the eastern Nile Delta, not very far from Wādi Tumaylāt. If the Arabs dominated this part of Egypt in the third century BC, it is very likely that Manetho’s remark reflects these contemporary conditions.
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onomasticon (cf. Altheim/Stiehl, Araber I 82). It could in that case be an imperfect yābul from YBL or yābul/yābul from NBL. The prefix vowel -a- indicates Arabic, like lamblikhos (yamīk). The assimilation of -a- points to a dialect in the western or north-western part of Arabia. Altheim/Stiehl (loc. cit.) believe he came from Nabataea.

60 Diodorus 2.55.4.
61 Diodorus 2.57.3.
62 Diodorus 2.58.7.
63 Diodorus 2.59.2.
64 Diodorus 2.55.1.
65 Diodorus 2.60.2.
66 It has often been supposed that the island Panchaea in Euhemerus and the Happy Island in lambulus would be Soqotra. A suggested etymology of Soqotra is that it is the Sanskrit dvikap sukhatara, ‘the happy island’, which, unfortunately, is most uncertain (Glaser, Geographie 11). It is perhaps an old popular etymology of the name of the island ultimately derived from the accounts of the two utopists.
67 Aristophanes, Birds 144–145.
68 Euripides, Bacchae 15–17; cf. p. 242. In a scholion to Aristophanes’ Birds 44–45 it is said: ‘The Red Sea is in the east. According to others he speaks about Arabia eudaimôn’ (Scholia in Aves 145.3). This scholion is from a time when Happy Arabia was located in South Arabia but the original meaning of the verse was still remembered. The scholiast had to link differing views together.
69 Cf. Potts, Gulf 1 85 ff. for references.
70 Potts, Gulf I 86.
71 Pritchard, Texts 44.
72 Translation according to Kramer/Maier, Myths 24. Cf. Pritchard, Texts 38.
73 Tarn/Griffith, Civilisation 121–125; Altheim/Stiehl, Araber I 80–92.
74 Qur’ān 27:24: yasqūdina lī-š-samsi min dāni l-lāhi. min dāni is to be taken negatively as ‘instead of’: they did not worship God but the sun.
75 See p. 425, n. 66.
76 Ibn Hishām, Tīfān 162.
77 Cf. Philby, Queen, colour illustration, Section I 2c.
78 Raschke, Studies 657.
79 Jones, Cities 239–240.
80 Jacoby, Hekataios 2758 ff.; Jacoby, Fragmenta 3A 11–64 (no. 264).
81 Diodorus 1.19.6: Osiris marches through Arabia on his way to India; 45.2: The king Tefhakhtos (= Tef-Sukht twenty-third dynasty?) was near dying from thirst in Arabia during a campaign there; 53.5–6: Sesoois (= Sesostris?) marches to Arabia and subdues the people of the ārabes; 57.4 (cf. Strabo 16.4.4): the same king builds a wall to defend the road from Syria and Arabia from Pelusium to Heliopolis; 63.6: king Khenmis the Memphite (= Cheops?) takes stones for his buildings in Arabia, i.e. the Mekattam mountain east of Cairo; 89.1–2: robbers from Libya and Arabia do not dare to cross the Nile because of the crocodiles.
82 Cf. Tarn, Ptolemy 11.
83 Cf. Diodorus 3.42.1; Strabo 16.4.4; cf. Tarn, Ptolemy.
84 Diodorus, 3.42–47; Strabo, 16.4.18–19; Photius, 7.134–189 (Codex 250); Jacoby, Fragmenta 2A 211–222 (no. 86); Altheim/Stiehl, Araber I 65–69.
85 See Burstein, Agatharchides 37–38.
86 Burstein, Agatharchides 147.
87 Burstein, Agatharchides 147 note 3.
88 Burstein, Agatharchides 148 with references. The reading nēssa, ‘duck’, is said to be a mistake for nēs, ‘island’ (Burstein, loc. cit.). Musil (Hējāz 302) says that the word tirān means a kind of sea-bird, which would give a meaning to the Photius text. The word is, however, not documented in any Arabic dictionary.
89 For Rās al-Quṣba, see Musil, Hējāz 302. For Rās Muhammed, see Noth, Zur Geschichte 139. There are no forests on either the Arabian or the Sinai side of the inlet. Around Rās Muhammed there are, however, large areas of mangrove along the sea shore.
THE HEIRS OF ALEXANDER

90 The obscurity of the passage in all three witnesses may be due to the fact that Rās Muhammed is an elevation connected with the mainland by a narrow, sandy isthmus. Diodorus says the island is at (prōs) the akroterion of the mainland. Photius says it is close to (engys) the akroterion; Strabo says near (pelston). Only Strabo says that the akroterion stretches towards the north; the two others say it stretches from the island towards the north. Diodorus adds that the akroterion projects from (prōketoς) the island. The partly contradictory statements can be harmonized if we assume that the akroterion in fact is the isthmus itself that stretches from both the island and the mainland, whereas the island is the present-day Rās.

91 Cf. Noth, *Zur Geschichte* esp. p. 140. Noth takes ‘the straight line’ of Agatharchides as a description of maritime and overland routes (geraden Weges) from South Arabia via (Nabataean) Petra to Gaza, since Petra to him, as to everybody else, must be the Nabataean capital. But Agatharchides’ text does not speak about trade routes or roads. The word euθeia means ‘straight’, not ‘road’. Instead the word grammē, ‘line’, is to be understood. The word θέορουμένη, ‘observed’, refers to some kind of visual observation. The impression is that Agatharchides has referred to some kind of map, perhaps that of Eratosthenes, which must have been known to him. It is clear that he, in this passage, has added information from other sources to that derived from Aristotle. Stern, *Authors* 3-4, 6-7 note 3 (referring to Aristotle, *Meteorology* II 359a), 348–349, 515–520 (referring to Statius, *Silvae* 2.1.161, 3.2.105, 5.1.213) etc. points out that there are signs that the Greeks in Aristotle’s time could already include Judaea in Palaistinē. Cf. also Philo, *De Virtutibus* 221; idem, *Vita Mosis* 1.163; Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.145, 20.259. This would be in line with the tendency observed already in Herodotus of calling even the lands behind Arabia by the same name. This does not, however, contradict the arguments here about the location of the Rock, since there are no indications that Palaistinē included Transjordan. The arguments by Jacobson (*Palestine*) that the very name Palaistinē is a cover term for Israel in Herodotus are not convincing.

92 See p. 369.

93 Burstein, *Agatharchides* 150 note 2. There is obviously an early confusion between the name Ayla/Elat and Liḥyān. The latter name is reflected in the form of the name in Diodorus and Photius. This confusion is evident in a passage in Pliny’s *Natural History* (6.156): ‘There is an interior bay in which the Laeanitae [live] who have given it their name. Their capital is Agra and on the bay is Laeana or, as others [call it] Aelana; for the [name of] the bay our people write Laeniticum, Artemidorus [writes] Aleaniticum and Iuba Leantiticum. We notice that Artemidorous’ form is in agreement with that of Strabo. Agra is probably Ḥiğr, the capital of the Liḥyanite kings near present-day al-Ṭūb.

94 Cf. p. 137.


96 This sanctuary may also be referred to by Pliny (6.155) when he mentions the island Sygaros near the bay of the Laeanitae ‘which dogs do not enter’.

97 Photius seems to have repeated himself when copying Agatharchides and has not realized that the Bythemanœï and the Batmizomanœï refer to the same group.


103 The texts from Dedan, Liḥyān and the Thamudic and Safaitic epigraphic texts all show the prefixed h- as the definite article.

104 The Pithom stele; see Tarn, *Ptolemy* 9.


108 LXX Genesis 45:10, 46:34.