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Ancient South Arabian within Semitic and Sabaic within Ancient South Arabian
In some of his articles in the last few years, P. Stein (Stein 2012, 2012 a) reiterated his reconstruction of the relationships between Sabaic (SAB) and the North-West Semitic, and between SAB and non-SAB languages in southern Arabia. In his articles, P. Stein always mentions that there is a different working hypothesis set up by what he calls the ‘Pisa school’. It seems though that the arguments put forward by the ‘Pisa school’ do not seem convincing and did not affect Stein’s reconstruction. Once again, it may be worth discussing some aspects of the problem.

Stein’s reconstruction is based on a hypothesis initially presented by N. Nebes in 2001. The linguistic reconstruction proposed by N. Nebes and P. Stein finds justification in the hypothesis put forward by R. Hetzron about the classification of Semitic languages, also confirmed by R. Voigt in 1987 and by N. Nebes in 1994 for what concerns Ancient South Arabian (ASA) languages.

If we accept this general classification framework it seems acceptable to believe that some isoglosses are more relevant than others. According to R. Hetzron (Hetzron 1974) the identification of an innovative area (the Central Semitic) is related to two main isoglosses: the creation of the verbal form yVqTvl and, therefore, the absence in Central Semitic of the verbal opposition iprus/iparras typical of the Akkadian language, which is reflected in the yәnәggәr/yәngәr opposition in the Ethiopian language and in Modern South Arabian (MSA); and the presence of the causative prefix and of the third person suffixed pronoun in h in the innovative Central Semitic, opposed to the verbal causative and the third person suffixed pronoun in -s in the conservative Marginal Semitic.

Incidentally, it is necessary to reiterate from the very beginning that for some scholars the isogloss iprus/iparras vs. yәnәggәr/yәngәr is questionable – in Ethiopic the form yVqattVl could be a secondary creation – and that the s>h sound change is common throughout Central Semitic.

Moreover, the absence of a yqVttVl form is not definitive in SAB nor in non-SAB languages in Southern Arabia.

Both R. Hetzron and R. Voigt developed their hypotheses when much of the most ancient documentation from ASA kingdoms was still unknown, and when the grammatical structure of non-SAB languages was less known than it is today.

I am trying to argue once again that the hypothesis of a migration of a population of SAB/proto-SAB speakers from the north as an engine for the formation of the ASA culture, is anti-historical and – frankly – quite improbable. But, the recent ‘arrival’ of proto-SAB/SAB speakers is not a secondary element in the ASA classification, inside Semitic, offered by N. Nebes and P. Stein. The hypothesis of SAB as a
language belonging to the innovative Central Semitic, opposed to ‘archaic’ non-SAB languages, loses much of its argumentative strength if we consider the formation of the ASA family as the result of a process developed within southern Arabia, a process that led to the constitution of four written languages including SAB.

Linguistic contacts must also be hypothesized, but a cultural and linguistic contact from South to North cannot be excluded a priori from the exclusive advantage of a North to South direction.

The synchronic relationship among ASA languages is an interesting topic both on a linguistic and historical level. In the formative period of the ASA civilisation, a ‘Sabaeization’ process in several areas of Yemen, a linguistic and cultural contact, has often been referred in the studies carried out by N. Nebes and P. Stein.

A linguistic and cultural contact between Sabaʾ and non-Sabaean kingdoms is witnessed in the epigraphic documentation, but the time in which the contact occurred, and the content of such contact, still remains to be clarified.

The ‘Sabaeization’ of non-SAB languages does not depend on a Sabaean political control, nor on a generic cultural prestige imposed on peripheral areas from the newcomers who were technologically and culturally more evolved.

In my opinion, the teaching of writing from a cultural centre of dissemination – which the documentation we have today at our disposal seems to locate in the Jawf region (marked by a strong Sabaean presence) – is the main reason behind the ‘Sabaeization’ of non-SAB languages.
2. Ancient South Arabian within Semitic

2.1. Nebes and archaeology

N. Nebes hypothesized, supported by archaeological and linguistic proof, that Proto-Canaanite/pre-SAB speakers arrived from the North into a linguistically archaic area. The ancient inhabitants accepted numerous linguistic and cultural elements from the newcomers and vice-versa. Fifteen years ago, when Nebes’s article was published, the hypothesis seemed to be supported by the archaeology.

In those years the first archaeological results on the Bronze period in Yemen were published. Neither the results of the excavations of the German team in Sabir, in the South-West area of Yemen (Vogt, Sedov 1998; Vogt, Sedov, Buffa, 2002) nor of the surveys of A. de Maigret (de Maigret 1990) on the plateau, in the area of Dhamār, seemed to imply any evident relation with ASA culture. The formation of ASA culture outside Arabia was an idea strongly supported by almost all archaeologists working in Yemen at the end of the last century, who believed that a migration from the north of groups of peoples, in the second millennium, brought to Yemen building techniques, different types of pottery, and script.

According to N. Nebes the analysis of the linguistic situation within Yemen supported the migratory model as proposed by the archaeologists.

Today the caution of N. Nebes when expounding his hypothesis of migration and cultural transfer from Sabaʾ to the ancient inhabitants of the Yemen is highly appreciated. N. Nebes emphasizes in his article that his reconstruction is a working hypothesis, in need of clear historical evidence but especially of data from north Arabia.

Moreover, 15 years ago when N. Nebes wrote his contribution, a long chronological interval seemed to exist between the Aramaic and Canaanite epigraphic documentation and the ASA one. Some epigraphic ASA texts from the first half of the eighth century are still not known, nor had a date at the end of the second millennium been demonstrated for the most ancient texts in minuscule script.

Also for the learning of script in South Arabia, once again I believe it is worth emphasizing Nebes’s cautious approach. He found it unlikely that script technique was brought directly by the proto-Canaanite/pre-SAB populations migrating from the North to Yemen, but it had to be set in a previous time: