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Najrān

JÉRÉMIE SCHIETTECATTE

Najrān (Sab. Nagrān ; Gr. Νεγράνων /Ναγαρα ; Lat. Negrana /Nagara): 40-km-long oasis located along the wādī Najrān in southwest Saudi Arabia. Najrān is also the name of the main city, and that of the tribe which was settled there in the early Christian era. The luxuriance of the oasis and its unique location on the caravan roads fostered the regional development from the first millennium BCE onward. The richness of the oasis is echoed in a third century Sabaic inscription (Ja 577) which mentions sixty-eight settlements, sixty thousand fields, and ninety-seven wells. Ammianus Marcellinus counted Najrān as one of the seven chief cities in *Arabia Felix* (Amm. Marc. *Res Gestae*, 23.6.47).

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

From the eighth to the sixth century BCE, the valley of Najrān was the heart of the kingdom of Muhaʾmir, with its capital city at Ragmat (Hebr. *Raʿmah* – Gen 10:7,7; Ezek 27:22). At around the fifth century BCE, the kingdom of Amīr succeeded that of Muhaʾmir; Ragmat was abandoned for the benefit of a new capital city, and Zirbān, later called Najrān, was occupied until the very 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, being a regular square bisected by a main street into two equal parts (Figure 1). Surrounded by an *extra muros* settlement, the town extended over 50 ha. The main deity dhu-Samāwī was worshiped in the temple Kaʾbatan.

Owing to the strategic location of Najrān, neighboring kingdoms took a keen interest in its control. Coveted by the kingdom of Sabaʾ, the city of Ragmat was burned down during amilitary expedition. Thereafter, Najrān joined the trade coalition headed by the south Arabian kingdom of Maʿin (fourth to second centuries BCE); in 25 BCE, the town was seized by Aelius Gallus' expedition (Strab. *Geogr*. 16.4.24; Plin. *HN* 6.32.160); a few decades later, Sabaʾ 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 205), Maraʾ al-Qays, son of ʿAmraw king of all ʿArab, said he fought with the tribe of Madhhij " until he struck with his spear the gates of Najrān, the city of Shammar [Yuharʾish, 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 is likely that the inhabitants of the oasis – under their control – did likewise. At 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 Shurihbiʾīl 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 Asʾar 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 HIMYAR to the Aksumite princes for half a century.

Under the authority of the descendants of the leader of the Christian community, al- Hārith bin Kaʿb (Gr. Arethas), executed during the persecution, the tribal group of the inhabitants of Najrān took the name of its ruling dynasty: the banū al-Hārith bin Kaʿb. Najrān became again an active trade centre, 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 ʿUmar, the Monophysites were expelled, and they 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 were settled there at least until the early thirteenth century (Ibn al-Mujāwir, *Taʾrīkh al-Mustabsir* : 209).

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FIGURE 1 Plan of the *intra muros* area at al-Ukhdūd (Schiettecatte, J. 2011: figure 143). Reproduced with permission from Schiettecatte, J. 2011. Figure originally based on material from Zarins et al., 1983.

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