

On the origins of the god *Ruḍaw* and some remarks on the pre-Islamic North Arabian pantheon



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Abstract

This contribution proposes an interpretation of a newly attested divine title of the ancient Arabian deity *Ruḍaw*, *mkšd* ‘(the one) from Chaldea’. It explores what sense this title could have had and its implications on our understanding of *Ruḍaw*’s position in the ancient Arabian pantheon, especially in relation to *Allāt*. It also examines mentions of *Ruḍaw* in Islamic-period narrative sources and concludes that his cult likely disappeared by Islamic times; tales of the destruction of his cult site reflect the use of the ‘smashing idols’ topos to narrativize the passage from pre-Islam to Islam.

Ruḍaw in Islamic-period sources

Ibn Ishāq (d. 767)—the famed collector of lore about the prophet Mohammad, the nascent Muslim community, and pre-Islam—remarked on the existence of a pagan cult site called *ruḍā*.¹

وكانت رضاء بيتا لبني ربيعة بن كعب بن سعد بن زيد مناة بن تميم، ولها يقول المستور بن ربيعة بن كعب بن سعد حين هدمها في الإسلام
ولقد شددت على رضاء شدة * فتركها قفرا بقاع أشحما

Ruḍā was a temple belonging to Rabi‘ah son of Ka‘b son of Sa‘d son of Zayd—Manāt son of Tamīm and Al-Mustawgīr son of Ka‘b son of Sa‘d said concerning it when he destroyed it in the time of Islam:

‘I launched a mighty attack upon *Ruḍā*’ and left it in ruin, charred black’

Ibn Hišām (d. 833) offers further details on the character of *Ruḍā*’s destroyer.²

ويقال: إن المستور هذا عاش ثلاثمائة سنة وثلاثين سنة، وكان أطول مضر كلها عمرا، وهو الذي يقول
ولقد سئمت من الحياة وطولها * وعمرت من عدد السنين مئينا

I thank Hythem Sidky for a lovely afternoon of perusing through the Arabic sources for information on *Ruḍaw* and al-Mustawgīr with me. I thank Jérôme Norris, David Kiltz, Benjamin Suchard, and Harald Samuel for their helpful comments and improvements on a draft of this paper; all errors are my own.

¹See Ibn Hišām (d. 213 AH/ 833 CE), *as-ṣīrah an-nabawiyyah* (M. Al-Saqā and I. Al-Shibli, (eds.)), (Cairo, 1955), p. 87.

²Ibn Hišām, *as-ṣīrah an-nabawiyyah*, p. 88; The details are repeated in Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-n-Niyāhah* (Ḥ. ‘Abd al-Mannān (eds), (Beirut, 2004), p. 292.

مائة حدثها بعدها مائتان لي * وازددت من عدد الشهور سنينا
هل ما بقي إلا كما قد فاتنا * يوم يمر وليلة تحدونا

And it is said that this al-Mustawgīr lived for three-hundred and thirty years and was the longest lived of all of Muḍar; he is the one who said:³ 'I have grown tired of life, spanning centuries. I saw two-hundred years, then one hundred more; and the months keep turning to years; but is there anything coming that hasn't already passed? Day goes by, always followed by night'

Ibn Al-Kalbī (d. 819) briefly mentions *ruḍā'* in his famous *Kitāb al-'Aṣṇām* 'the Book of Idols'. His report is virtually identical to Ibn Ishāq's account but expresses some uncertainty as to the exact identity of the figure. He notices that the name *ruḍā* رضى, this time given with an *alif-maqṣūrah* in the edition, occurs in theophoric names.

وقد كانت العرب تسمى بأسماء يعبدونها. لا أدري أعيدوها للأصنام أم لا؟ منها:
"عبد ياليل" و"عبد غنم" و"عبد كلال" و"عبد رضى"

And the Arabs were called after the names (of those) they worshipped; I do not know whether what they worshipped were (names) of idols or not; among them are: 'abdu-yālīl and 'abdu-ḡanm and 'abdu-kulāl and 'abdu-ruḍā'⁴

The particular spelling ibn al-Kalbī gives in the edition, if it reflects the original manuscript and not an editorial choice, is in fact faithful to the most common pre-Islamic form of the divine name, as we shall see. While the form *ruḍā'* occurs in the quoted line of poetry attributed to al-Mustawgīr, it is clearly *metri causa*, perhaps motivated by a merger of the *alif-maqṣūrah* /ā/ and the *alif-mamdūdah* /ā' / in later forms of Arabic.⁵

From the Islamic-period accounts, it is clear that a faint memory of *ruḍā* as an object of pagan reverence persisted but not much more. The survival of the name 'abdu-ruḍā— if only as a component of genealogies—would have been enough to signal that *ruḍā* was the name of god, even if his worship had long ago ceased. Thus the line of poetry attributed to al-Mustawgīr need not—and likely does not, considering his mythological nature—reflect a memory of an historical event but simply the use of the smashing idols *topos* to narrativise the passage from pre-Islam to Islam.⁶

Ruḍaw in pre-Islamic sources and his place of origin

The pre-Islamic inscriptions justify ibn al-Kalbī's reservations regarding the interpretation of divine name as a *bayt*; Ruḍā was in fact one of the most widely worshipped deities in

³Note that ibn Hiṣām say that some attribute these lines to Zuhayr b. Ḡanāb b. Hubal.

⁴Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-'Aṣṇām*, A. Z. Bāṣā (ed.), (Cairo, 1913), p. 30.

⁵For example, in most modern dialects of Arabic the two sounds have merged to /a/: Levantine Arabic *sama* < **samā* 'un 'sky' and *bana* < **banā* < **banāya* 'he built'. It is unclear how old this particular change is; it is possible that some dialects already experienced it by the 8th c. CE. The spelling *rd'*, however, is occasionally attested in the pre-Islamic inscriptions. We shall discuss this further in the next section.

⁶The destruction of idols is one of the great *topos* of monotheism in a polytheistic setting, common in the Hebrew Bible and Christian iconography, where saints are often depicting destroying images of pagan deities; for a discussion of this phenomenon and further references, see M. Leone, "Smashing Idols: A Paradoxical Semiotics", *Signs and Society* 4.1 (2016), pp. 30–56. The tales collected by ibn al-Kalbī are reminiscent of the account of young Abraham in Chapter 38 of Genesis Rabba, where he smashes the idols with a stick, save for the largest whom he frames for this act of vandalism. Following G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 95–110, I would submit that most of ibn al-Kalbī's reports belong to this genre of storytelling—the details he describes must be examined against the archaeological and epigraphic record rather than being taken at face value. A work with this as its goal is in preparation by the author.

pre-Islamic North Arabia. The oldest datable attestation of Ruḏa is found in cuneiform transcription, in the Esarhaddon prism. The text recounts the conquest of the oasis of Dūmat by the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705–681 BC).⁷ He carries off as booty a number of idols, including one called ^d*ru-ul-da-a-u*.⁸ The local North Arabian inscriptions from the area of Dūmat—the so-called Dumaitic inscriptions—attest the same divine name as *rḏw*, suggesting the pronunciation /ruḏaw/ = [ruṣaw].⁹ Ruḏaw is in fact one of the most commonly invoked deities in several Ancient North Arabian corpora. He is frequently called upon in the Thamudic B inscriptions as well as in Safaitic. Curiously, however, he is absent in Hismaic, Dadanitic, and the Nabataean inscriptions, which share a partially overlapping geographical space.¹⁰ In the inscription WTI 23, Ruḏaw is invoked besides *nhy* and *'trsm*, both deities attested in the Esarhaddon prism.¹¹ The same formulaic invocation is attested in Thamudic B, Safaitic, and in Oasis North Arabian.¹²

Dumaitic

WTI 23¹³

h rḏw w-nhy w-'trsm s'd-n 'l-wdd-y

‘O Rḏw and Nhy and ‘trsm, help me in the matter of my desire’¹⁴

Oasis North Arabian

Anon Tay¹⁵

h rḏw w 'trsm bgy bddh hywt

‘O Rḏw and ‘trsm, may Bddh achieve (lit. reach) a long life’

⁷BM 121005; https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1929-1012-1.

⁸On the pronunciation of this name, see A. al-Jallad, “New evidence from a Safaitic inscription for a late velar/uvular realisation of *ṣ in Aramaic”, *Semitica* 58 (2016), pp. 257–270. Note that the cluster *ld* does not require us to assume a voiced pronunciation. The cuneiform sign DA signifies both /da/ and /ta/.

⁹Dumaitic is a modern label given to a small number of texts associated with the oasis of Dūmat; the corpus traditionally consisted of only three texts (WTI 21–23), but has grown slightly in recent years to about 20 texts; for the most recent discussion of the corpus, see J. Norris, “A survey of the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions from the Dūmat al-Jandal area (Saudi Arabia), in M. C. A. Macdonald (eds), *Languages, scripts and their uses in ancient North Arabia. (Supplement to volume 48 of the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies)*, (Oxford, 2018), pp. 71–93; pp. 75–79. Note that Herodotus mentions an Arabian deity called Ὀρωτάλ/Ὀρωτάλτ (*Histories* III, 8), whom he calls the main deity of the Arabs. Most scholars have made the reasonable connection with Ruḏaw, Healey, *Religion of the Nabataeans*, p. 94, but its surviving form is far too garbled to inform the reconstruction of the pronunciation of Ruḏaw. If the identification is correct, the presence of the *l* at least confirms the lateral pronunciation of Arabic *ḏ* in this period.

¹⁰There does not seem to be any trace of Ruḏaw’s worship in the other categories of Thamudic so far.

¹¹These two are spelled ^dNu-ḥa-a-a and ^dA-tar-sa-ma-a-a-in, respectively.

¹²This shared formula in part motivated me to suggest a developmental relationship between these script categories. I would see Thamudic B – a ‘Desert North Arabian’ script as having developed from an Oasis North Arabian prototype. Both Dumaitic and Thamudic B can plausibly be dated at least to the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, and possibly older, while Safaitic is best situated at the end of the 1st millennium BCE, gradually developing from Thamudic B in the Syro-Jordanian Ḥarraḥ. See A. Al-Jallad and K. Jaworska, *A Dictionary of the Safaitic Inscriptions*, (Leiden, 2019), Chapter 1.

¹³WTI = Thamudic inscriptions in F. V. Winnett and R. L. Reed, *Ancient Records from North Arabia*, (Toronto, 1970).

¹⁴The term *wdd* is most often interpreted as ‘love’, but its use with the invocation *'tm(n)* ‘fulfill’ suggest that it should be better understood as related to *wudd/widd* ‘desire’, ‘wish’, a meaning which continues into the modern Arabic vernaculars of north Arabia (and ultimately giving rise to the pseudo-verb ‘to want’ in Levantine Arabic *bidd* < *bi-widd* ‘in the wish of’). On the formula *'tm(n) wdd*, see F.V. Winnett, “Studies in Ancient North Arabian,” *JAOS* 107 (1987), pp. 239–244; p. 240.

¹⁵This particular example is extremely interesting as the letter shapes more closely resemble the Taymanitic script but the contents and language are clearly Thamudic B. The text was published on OCIANA under the siglum Anon Tay. The OCIANA edition translates the prayer as: “help Bddh to find advantage”.

Thamudic B

Mr.A 21

h rḏw s'd bn 'wn 'l-wdd-h

'O Ruḏaw, help Bn 'wn in the matter of his desire'

Safaitic

KRS 2717¹⁶

h rḏw s'd 'yb b-ḏ-wd

'O Rḏw, help 'yb with that which he desires'

A variant of Ruḏaw is attested in the Safaitic inscription as *rḏy*, presumably [roṣay].¹⁷ Incidentally, this corresponds in spelling with the form given by ibn al-Kalbī – رضى = *rḏy*. While there are many theories on the relationship between *rḏw* and the Safaitic form *rḏy*, I believe there is little doubt that the *y*-form is simply the result of a phonological/grammatical development in Safaitic, reflecting the tendency to merge III-w and III-y roots to the value of the latter.¹⁸ This change anticipates the total merger of the two root classes in modern Arabic, a process already underway in Classical Arabic, giving rise to both رضى and رضا.¹⁹ The prevalence of the form *rḏw* in Thamudic B and Dumaitic suggests that this development had not yet occurred in the middle of the first millennium BCE.

Now, while it is clear that Ruḏaw was worshipped across North Arabia, stretching from Ḥā'il to Dūmat, as far as the Syro-Jordanian Ḥarrah, there was until now no evidence as to where Ruḏaw's cult—for any period—was centered. A new Dumaitic inscription, published on OCIANA, may hold a clue.²⁰ The *editio princeps* gives the following reading and interpretation.

Transliteration

sm' {h}-h / 'trsm / w rḏw / mkṣd // l whb {r}ḏw / h-qrt / f sm' l-h

Translation

{Whbrḏw} is on this black hillock and listen to him

Listen {to} him 'trsm and Rḏw Mkṣd

The *editio princeps* leaves the final word of the first line untranslated. It would appear to be a title of some sort, but the root *kṣd* is not productive in Arabic or any other closely related

¹⁶KRS = Safaitic inscriptions collected by G. M. H. King on the Badia Rescue Survey from Northeastern Jordan and published on OCIANA.

¹⁷The short high vowels, *u and *i, were realized slightly lower in Safaitic than in the conventional pronunciation of Classical Arabic, as /o/ and /e/, respectively. See A. al-Jallad, "Graeco-Arabica I: the Southern Levant", in A. al-Jallad (ed.), *Arabic in Context* (Brill, 2017), pp. 99–188; pp. 142–145.

¹⁸See A. al-Jallad, "New evidence from a Safaitic inscription for a late velar/uvular realization of *ṣ in Aramaic", *Semitica* 58 (2016) pp. 260–263; J. Norris, "Dushara dans une Inscription Thamoudique B de la région du Wādī Ramm (Jordanie du sud)", *Topoi* 22 (2018), pp. 185–223; pp. 206–207. For a summary of previous opinions, see F. V. Winnett and R. L. Reed, *Ancient Records from North Arabia*, pp. 75–76; J. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus* (Leiden, 2001), pp. 94–95.

¹⁹Note that in Old Ḥigāzī and indeed in other forms of pre-normative Classical Arabic, these two words would have been pronounced distinctively—the former as [ruṣ'ē] and the latter as [ruṣ'ā]; see M. van Putten, "The development of the triphthongs in Quranic and Classical Arabic", *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 3 (2017), pp. 47–74.

²⁰The inscription was found near Sakākā, in the region of Al-Ġawf, Saudi Arabia, but its exact location is not known. The OCIANA record is Al-Ġawf Dum 1.



Fig 1: al-Ġawf Dum 1 (Courtesy OCIANA)

language. Moreover, the *m-* before it would seem to suggest—if it is to be taken as a title—that it is a participle. Since it is modifying *rḏw*, the absence of the definite article is unexpected. I would like to suggest a new interpretation of this phrase: it should be parsed as two words: *m-* ‘from’ and *kšd* ‘Chaldea’.

This interpretation is supported by the *m-* + toponym pattern attested in both Safaitic and Nabataean. In a recent article, I have suggested that this title signifies the deity’s cultic center or mythological residence, in contrast with the use of *b-* which signifies a local manifestation or cult.²¹ Thus, in Nabataean the goddess Allāt is invoked based on her manifestation at regional cults, *’ltw dy b-’mm* ‘Allāto who is at ’Iram’; *’lt ’lht’ d(y) b-bšr* ‘Allāt the goddess who is at Bostra’;²² but once she is called upon as *’lt mn ’mn{w}* ‘Allāt from ’mnw’. The same title is found in Safaitic, once as *m-’mn* (C 2446) and once as *mn ’mn*; in the same inscription Dusares is also called upon as *mn rqm* ‘from Petra.’²³

The term Chaldea originally signified a group of West Semitic immigrants in southern Mesopotamia, which then became a geographic term referring to the southern extremity of Babylonia, the territories inhabited by these Chaldean tribes (see below). In the Bible, Chaldea is basically synonymous with Babylon—Nebuchadnezzar II is called both king of Babylon and king of the Chaldeans.²⁴ This, however, appears to be an exonym employed by biblical authors; the title ‘king of the Chaldeans’ is not employed by the “Chaldean dynasty” founded by Nabopolassar in cuneiform texts. Would, then, the Arabs have also employed this exonym? It is possible. Jeremiah mentions that Nebuchadnezzar II fought against Qaydar during his Levantine campaigns and so if the exonym “Chaldean” was

²¹See A. al-Jallad, “The Seven Stars, Allāt from *’mn* and Dusares from *rqm*: a new Safaitic astronomical texts”, *Semitica et Classica* (forthcoming).

²²See Healey, *Religion of the Nabataeans*, pp. 110–112, for a discussion of these texts and further bibliography.

²³A. al-Jallad, “The Seven Stars”, §2.2.

²⁴For example, מַלְכָּךְ כַּשְׂדִּיִּים (2Chron 36:17) vs. מַלְכֵי-בָבֶל (Ezr 5:12), both referring to Nebuchadnezzar II. For a summary of this material, see the discussion in P.-A. Beaulieu, “Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs in Cuneiform Sources from the Late Babylonian Period”, in A. Berlejung and M. P. Streck (eds.), *Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs in Babylonia and Palestine in the First Millennium B.C.* (Wiesbaden, 2013), pp. 31–55, and the references there.

employed in this period, it is possible that it had spread to Arabia as well.²⁵ In South Arabia, too, the term *ks²d* signified southern Mesopotamia, geographical Babylonia.²⁶ The appellative seems to survive into the late 1st millennium BCE, where it is attested once in Safaitic.²⁷ The title *king of Babylon*, *mlk bbl* is attested in a number of Oasis North Arabian and Taymanitic inscriptions from the region of Taymā', and so it would seem to be the case that the Arabian situation paralleled that of the Bible, where *ks²d* and *bbl* were interchangeable.²⁸

Chaldea, as a geographic term, referred to the southern edge of Mesopotamia. Chaldean territories lay between Babylon and Uruk, extending as far as Nippur.²⁹ It may be significant then that in this same area, Arab settlements are reported in cuneiform sources. Eph'al makes note of several towns associated with Arabs in 8th c. BCE Babylonia, all within Chaldean territory—in the territories of the tribes *Bīt Dakkuri* and *Bīt Amukani*.³⁰ He goes on to note that a number of Dispersed Oasis North Arabian inscriptions from these same areas have been discovered and/or exhibit a Mesopotamian style, pointing towards their original provenance, and further underscoring a link with the populations of North Arabia.



Fig 2: Seal, provenance unknown, likely to be from southern Mesopotamia (courtesy OCIANA)³¹

²⁵Jeremiah 49:28–33; on Nebucahdnezzar's Palestinian campaigns, see A. Malamat, "A New Record of Nebuchadrezzar's Palestinian Campaigns", *Israel Exploration Journal* 6.4 (1956), pp. 246–256.

²⁶See the early Sabaic inscription B-L Naqš, see C. Robin and A. de Maigret "Le royaume sudarabique de Ma'in: nouvelles données grâce aux fouilles italiennes de Barāqish (l'antique Yathill). With appendix by S. Anthonioz: "Note complémentaire sur la guerre entre la Chaldée et l'Ionie"". *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* (2009), pp. 57–96, with the most recent discussion in Multhoff, Anne. "Merchant and marauder—The adventures of a Sabaeen clansman". *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 30.2 (2019), pp. 18–19. The term also occurs in Qatabanic; see M. Maraqtan. "On the relations between Bilād al-Shām and Yemen in the pre-Islamic period". in M. Mohammed. *A pioneer of Arabia. Studies in the Archaeology and Epigraphy of the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula in Honor of Moawiyah Ibrahim*. (Edited by) Zeidan Kafafi. (Rome, 2014), pp. 97–114.

²⁷This occurs in the narrative of MKMR 91 *w-ny-h h-kšdy* 'the Chaldaean(s) caused him suffering'; see A. al-Jallad and K. Jaworska, *A Dictionary of the Safaitic Inscriptions*, (Leiden, 2019), p. 91. The inscription is undated and the great uncertainties regarding the chronological limits of Safaitic documentation caution against assigning a more precise date. On the problems of dating Safaitic, as a whole, see A. al-Jallad, *An Outline of the Grammar of the Safaitic Inscriptions*, (Leiden, 2015), pp. 17–18.

²⁸On these texts, see H. Hayajneh, "First evidence of Nabonidus in the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions from the region of Taymā'", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 31 (2001), pp. 81–95; W. W. Müller and S. F. al-Sa'id, "Der babylonische König Nabonid in taymanischen Inschriften," *Biblische Notizen* 107–108 (2001), pp. 109–119.

²⁹P.-A. Beaulieu, "Aramaeans, Chaldeans, and Arabs", pp. 39–42.

³⁰I. Eph'al, "Arabs in Babylonia in the 8th c. BCE", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94.1 (1974), pp. 108–115; p. 113.

³¹F. Bron, "Sur quelques sceaux à légendes sudarabiques et proto-arabes". *Syria* 62 (1985), pp. 337–341; E. Porada & B. Buchanan, *Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections. 1 The Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library, Part 1: Text, Part 2: Plates*. (Washington, 1948), p. 93 Plates: CXV: 762 Number: 762;



Fig 3: Uruk Tablet (courtesy OCIANA)³²

These settlements appear to have remained in place into the early Achaemenid period. Documents from the archive of Nergal-iddin mention a place near Nippur called URU ša^{lu} Ar-ba-a-a, that is, ‘the city of the Arabs’, well within the traditional geographic boundaries of Chaldea.³³

While the evidence is extremely limited, the presence of groups called *Aribi* (with other allophonic variants), personal names of chieftains that have an Arabic etymology, and the presence of Dispersed Oasis North Arabian inscriptions concentrated in Chaldea together strongly suggest that the groups called “Arabs” in Akkadian sources were indeed connected to populations in North Arabia. In this light, the title *m-kšd* may suggest that a major cult site of Ruḏaw was located among these communities, to which North Arabians may have visited on pilgrimages. Or perhaps the phrase should be understood in terms similar to *יְהוָה סִינַי* ‘(he) of Sinai’ (Ps. 68:9; Judges 5:5), a title of God/Yahweh in the Bible, and also with the preposition *mī*: *יְהוָה מִסִּינַי בָּא* ‘Yahweh came from Sinai’; *אֱלֹהִים מִתֵּמָן יָבֹא* ‘God comes from Teman’.³⁴

Thus, Chaldea may have been considered the mythological residence of Ruḏaw. Only the discovery of new texts can help arbitrate between these two options. The absence of direct references to Ruḏaw in cuneiform Akkadian texts indicates that this divine name was used

B. Sass. *Studia Alphabetica. On the Origin and Early History of the Northwest Semitic, South Semitic and Greek Alphabets*. (Freiburg; Göttingen, 1991), pp. 48–49, Fig. 24, 25 [Seal-Ward]; W. H. Ward, *The seal cylinders of Western Asia*. (Washington D.C., 1910), p. 352.

³²R. D. Biggs, “A Chaldean Inscription from Nippur,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 179 (1965), pp. 36–38; G. Garbini, “Le iscrizioni proto-arabe,” *Annali dell’Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 36 [N.S. 26], (1976), pp. 165–174; B. Sass, *Studia Alphabetica*, pp. 41–42, Fig. 14 Plates: 14.

³³P.-A. Beaulieu, “Aramaean, Chaldeans, and Arabs”, p. 48.

³⁴On the Kenite theory, namely that Yahweh had a southern origin, see K. van der Toorn, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible 2nd edition*, (Leiden, 1999), pp. 910–919; see also F. Pfitzmann. *Un YHWH venant du Sud? De la réception vétérotestamentaire des traditions méridionales et du lien entre Madian, le Néguev et l’exode (Ex-Nb ; Jg 5 ; Ps 68 ; Ha 3 ; Dt 33)*. (Tübingen, 2020).

exclusively by Arabian communities, perhaps locally and certainly further away in the Peninsula.

Ruḏaw's place in the pantheon

There is a large literature on the identity of the deity *ruḏā* and what exactly s/he signified.³⁵ A clear understanding of this matter is challenged by the laconic nature of the inscriptions and uncertainties regarding their chronology. Ruḏaw is invoked in Ancient North Arabian inscription spanning from Central Arabia to the Syro-Jordanian Ḥarraḥ, perhaps over a span of a millennium. We cannot be sure – and indeed it may be unlikely—that these communities had a unified mythology of Ruḏaw, or any other deity they shared in common. With this in mind, the next paragraphs will be an experiment in the synthesis of the information we have from the pre-Islamic sources. I regard the conclusions I come to as tentative—merely possible—until better documentation comes forth.

The most popular opinion holds that Ruḏā was a female figure, but this, I think, is based on a misunderstanding of the evidence. The main arguments rest on the supposed use of feminine verbs with *rḏw/y* as the subject and the association of a drawing of a female figure with a nearby rock inscription mentioning *rḏw/y*.³⁶ I have explained elsewhere that neither of these claims can withstand scrutiny.³⁷ As Healey already points out, the connection between *rḏw*, which is just one of four gods invoked in C 4351, and the drawing on the same stone is not established. In fact, it is perhaps significant that there are no clear examples of the representation of deities mentioned in invocations in the rock art.³⁸ The second piece of evidence is the supposed feminine verb *wdt* ‘to grant a return’, followed by *rḏw* in C 5011.³⁹ One, however, is not required to interpret this form as a feminine verb; it could very well be an infinitive of command.⁴⁰ We can see clearly that *-t* augmented forms can accompany a male deity, where the “verb” should be taken either as an infinitive or a second person form – for example:

³⁵For a detailed discussion, with a special focus on the relation with Dusares, see J. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus* (Leiden), pp. 93–97.

³⁶Healey, *Religion of the Nabataeans*, p. 95. Most of the material assembled to support the identification of Rḏw/y as female is of this nature; see A.G. Lundin, “Die arabischen Göttinnen Ruḏā und al-‘Uzzā”, in R. G. Steigler, *Al-Hudhud. Festschrift Maria Höfner zum 80. Geburtstag* (Graz, 1981), pp. 211–218.

³⁷See al-Jallad, “Evidence for a velar/uvular *ṣ in Aramaic”, pp. 259–260.

³⁸This inscription is known only from a hand copy and is partially restored. The text reads: *l' {n} {m} {w} h {g} {d} {w} {d} {f} h {r} m w h ymyt w h rḏw q {r} {h-} qm* ‘By ‘n‘m and O Gaddo-‘Awīd and Raḥīm and Yomayyet, and Ruḏaw, may the people be established (in this place)’. The phrase *qr h-qm*, however, is very tentative. The tracing has *quqm*, which is also possible to interpret as /qawwū qawma/ ‘strengthen (the) people/army’. On the meaning of the female figures presented in the rock art see M. C. A. Macdonald, “Goddesses, dancing girls or cheerleaders? Perceptions of the divine and the female form in the rock art of pre-Islamic North Arabia”, *Dieux et déesses d’Arabie images et représentations Actes de la table ronde tenue au Collège de France (Paris) les 1er et 2 octobre 2007*, in I. Sachet and C. Robin (eds.), (Paris, 2012), pp. 7–118. Macdonald importantly demonstrates that none of the depictions of female figures in the Safaitic inscriptions can be identified with certainty as representations of a goddess.

³⁹C 5011: *l mtl bn qn bn 'nr bn 'sd w- wdt rḏw* ‘By Mtl son of Qn son of ‘nr son of ‘sd and may Ruḏaw grant a (safe) return’.

⁴⁰A. al-Jallad, “Safaitic”, in J. Huehnergard and N. Patel (eds), *The Semitic Languages, 2nd edition* (New York, 2019), pp. 342–366; pp. 362–363.

KJC 115⁴¹

sm' t dšry l-zdn w-šb-h h lt l-' kn

‘May Dšry give ear to Zdn and O Allāt, make him chief of the lineage of Kn’

A couple of Safaitic inscriptions may suggest that Ruḏaw was in fact male.

AWS 283⁴²

h 'lt bnt rḏw flt m-snt h-hrb flt' l bn ḥzr bn ḥdy bn wkyt

‘O Allāt daughter of Ruḏaw deliver Flt' l son of Ḥzr son of Ḥdy son of Wkyt from the year of war’

AWS 291

h 'lt bnt rḏw ḡwt-h ḥld bn ḥdrt bn 'brr w-l-h h-dr

‘O Allāt daughter of Rḏw, remove affliction from him, Ḥld son of Ḥdrt son of 'brr, while here at this place’

That 'Allāt is called the daughter of Ruḏaw suggests that the god is a male figure, as genealogies are always patrilineal in Safaitic (and Thamudic B). Now Ruḏaw's identity would seem to be linked to Allāt in the Safaitic tradition, if we may speak of such a thing. In North Arabia, the matter may be slightly different. Allāt is rather rare in the Thamudic B inscriptions and has not yet appeared in Dumaitic or the so-called dispersed Oasis North Arabian texts. Instead, there Ruḏaw appears alongside a different set of gods, each rare or unattested in Safaitic. In WTI 23, cited above, Ruḏaw is accompanied by Nuhay and 'Attarsamē. The latter is clearly a manifestation of Venus, 'Attar, followed by a reflex of the word for 'sky'.⁴³ The loss of the interdental may reflect a local linguistic development, namely, regressive assimilation, 'attar > attar, or it may indicate that the name was borrowed from Aramaic, where the change *t* > *t* is regular. The astral signification of 'Attarsamē may also imply that Ruḏaw and Nuhay were also astral.

A Thamudic B inscription from Ḥā'il presents Ruḏaw with Nuhay, and this time Shams.

Hu 789e

h nhy s'd-n 'lh t't

b-nhy t'zy nm whbnhy

b-k hs{r}{r} śms

mt'ly

h rḏw nqm whbnhy

⁴¹KJC = Hismaic inscriptions in G.M.H King, *Early North Arabian Hismaic*, PhD Dissertation, (London, 1990).

⁴²AWS = G.M.Y. 'Alūlū [Alulu], *Dirāsāt nuqūš šafawīyyah jadīdah min wādī al-sū ' ḡanūb sūrīyyah*. Unpublished M.A. thesis, (Yarmouk, 1996).

⁴³The divine name in cuneiform transcription is *dA-tar-sa-ma-a-in* / 'Attar-Šamayn/, suggesting that the Arabian attestation reflects a different vocalisation; see M. C. A. Macdonald, M. al Mu'azzin, and L. Nehmé, "Les inscriptions safaitiques de Syrie, cent quarante ans après leur découverte." *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions & Belles-Lettres* (1996), pp. 435–494; pp. 479–480. We can probably exclude an Arabisation of the name as 'Attar-Samāy, as in such a case we would expect the writing of the final glide, or a glottal stop if the sound change *āy* > *ā* had operated as in Classical Arabic. Another possibility is to regard the second element as reflecting Akkadian *šamē* 'sky, heaven', producing 'Attar-Samē or perhaps 'Attar-Samī. It remains curious though that the transcription of this name in the Essarhaddon prism corresponds to the Aramaic form, which is not attested in Arabia.

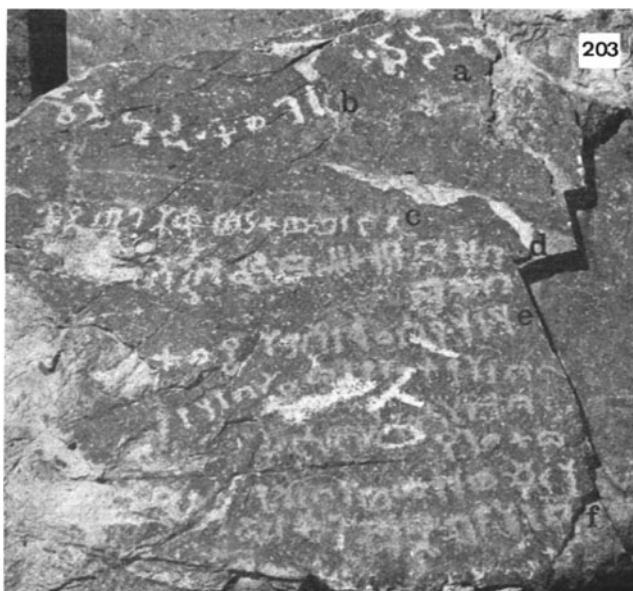


Fig 4: Hu 789e (Photo courtesy OCIANA)⁴⁴

Translation

O Nuhay, help me, god of (my) salvation
 Through Nuhay comes mercy for Wahbu-Nuhay
 Through you comes satisfaction, O (divine) Sun
 Ever-exalted
 O Ruḏaw, avenge Wahbu-Nuhay!

Returning to the matter of Allāt, many scholars have suggested that this deity corresponds to ‘Attar / Istar.⁴⁵ This could be supported by the fact that ‘Attarsamē and ‘Allāt seem to have a complementary distribution in the inscriptions—Allāt is common in Safaitic, Nabataean, and Himaic, where no reflex of ‘Attar is attested, while the opposite distribution is true of Thamudic B. Indeed, only a handful of texts invoking Allāt in this script type are known, and these limited exceptions may reflect a late diffusion of the western divine name to Thamudic B writers. Allāt is not attested in the Oasis North Arabian inscriptions, with the exception of a single Dadanitic text.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Hu = C. Huber, *Journal d'un voyage en Arabie (1883-1884)*. (Paris, 1891), pp. 136, 221, 222, 626E; F.V. Winnett and W. L. Reed, “An Archaeological-Epigraphical Survey of the Ḥā’il Area of Northern Sa’udi Arabia”. *Berytus* 22 (1973), pp. 53–113 and 13 plates; p. 88 Number: 203 e. Reading and interpretation follows the OCIANA edition.

⁴⁵This argument has been made for Palmyra; see, for example, S. Krone, *Die altarabische Gottheit al-Lāt*. (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), p. 331. See also, I. Rabinowitz, “Aramaic Inscriptions of the Fifth Century BCE. from a North-Arab Shrine in Egypt. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 15.1 (1956), pp. 1–9.

⁴⁶This text is JSLih 277, which is only known from a hand copy: *d’lm ’fkl lt ‘D’lm* ‘priest of Allāt’. JSLih = A. Jaussen & M. R. Savignac, *Mission archéologique en Arabie. I. (Mars-Mai 1907) De Jérusalem au Hedjaz, Médain Saleh. II. El-’Ela, d’Hégra à Teima Harrah de Tebouk. Texte et Atlas. III. Les châteaux arabes de Quṣeir ‘Amra, Ḥarāneh, et Tūba*. (5 volumes). (Publications de la Société Française des Fouilles Archéologiques, 2). [Reprinted Cairo: Institut Français

Healey presents three opinions on the identification of Allāt in her Nabataean context: the moon, Venus, and the sun.⁴⁷ Healey himself favors the identification with Venus, and presents the hypothesis that Allāt and Al-‘Uzzā were in fact the same deity, the latter being her epithet, ‘the mightiest’. Indeed, Herodotus explicitly identifies an Arabian goddess called ἀλλᾶτα, at least in some manuscripts, with Ourania, which Healey takes as a connection with Aphrodite.⁴⁸

A. Al-Manaser published an important invocation in Safaitic that provides the only known epithet of the goddess in that corpus:⁴⁹

MSSaf 6

h 'lt mlkt try s'd bn'm qsy bn zgr bn šrb w-r'y bql w h rḏw mḥlt l-m-‘wr

‘O Allāt, queen of abundance/fertility, help Bn‘m Qsy son of Zgr son of Šrb and he pastured on fresh herbage, and O Rḏw, may whosoever effaces (this writing) experience a dearth of pasture’

The title *mlkt try* is difficult to interpret. A. Al-Manaser suggested a connection with the Arabic noun *tarā*, that is, ‘moisture’ or ‘moist earth’, or possibly *ḡurayyā*, the ‘Pleiades’.⁵⁰ We should, however, be mindful of the fact that roots with final *y* and *w* have more or less merged in Safaitic. This means that *try* can correspond to the Classical Arabic root *t-r-w*, which gives rise to the verb *tarā* ‘to become many, great in number, quantity; to increase’. This ‘abundance’ can easily be seen as an aspect of fertility, one of the core qualities of Inanna/Ishtar/Aphrodite. Thus, the title would seem to be compatible with the view of Allāt as a Venusian deity.

So then, if we accept the identification of Allāt with ‘Attar / Ishtar, and specifically ‘Attar-Samāyīn, following I. Rabinowitz,⁵¹ then we can combine this with the Safaitic tradition, where Allāt is regarded as the daughter of Ruḏaw. If this mythological complex has an origin related to the Mesopotamian myths of Ishtar / Inanna—which could be supported given that Ruḏaw has a “Chaldean” center/origin—then, following Knauf, it is possible to view Ruḏaw as a lunar deity, the equivalent of Nanna / Šin.⁵² If this is correct, then it may lend further support for the reconstruction of an ancient Arabian astral myth, pairing the Moon and Venus. In Mesopotamia, and perhaps in North Arabia, the relationship was that of Father and Daughter, while in Ancient South Arabia, ‘Attar was the progenitor of the moon god.⁵³

d’Archéologie Orientale, 1997]. (Paris, 1909–1920), Volume: II, p. 506 Plates: CXXXV. On her presence here, see W. Caskel, *Lihyan und Lihyanisch*. (Cologne/Opladen, 1953), p. 104.

⁴⁷J. Healey, *Religion of the Nabataeans*, p. 114.

⁴⁸Herodotus. *Herodotus. Historiae I*. (Leipzig, 1987), I, 131; III, 8. See the cautious remarks of A. Hämeen-Anttila and R. Rollinger, “Herodot und die arabische Göttin ‘Alilat’”. G. R. Hawting suggests that the identification of Allāt as Venus, or some other celestial body, obtained among the audience of the Quran in the early 7th c. CE; see G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*, p. 147.

⁴⁹MSSaf = A. Al-Manaser and A. al-Sa’dūn, “Nuqūš ‘arabiyyah šamāliyyah qadīmah (šafāwiyyah): rasā’il qašīrah mina l-bādiyah al-‘urdunniyyah”, *al-Mağallah al-‘Urdunniyyah li-l-tārīḥ wa-l-‘āḍir* 11.1 (2017), pp. 25–40.

⁵⁰Note, however, that the Pleiades were likely called *sb’t ḡm* ‘seven stars’ in Safaitic; see A. al-Jallad, “Seven Stars”.

⁵¹I. Rabinowitz, “Aramaic Inscriptions”, p. 8.

⁵²Knauf, *Ismael* (Wiesbaden, 1985), p. 85.

⁵³On the background and development of the deity ‘Attar, see A. Wilson-Wright, *Athtart: The Transmission and Transformation of a Goddess in the Late Bronze Age* (Tübingen, 2016). On the gender of ‘Attar in South Arabia, see

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I offer a new translation of Al-Ġawf Dum 1. I will begin with the second line, as photographed.

Revised reading and translation

l whb{r}ḍw/h- qrt/f sm' l-h

sm' {l}-h/'trsm/w ṛḍw/m-ḳsd

By Whbrḍw, (who is at) this rock, so may they (the gods) give ear to him

May 'Attarsamē and Ruḍaw from Chaldea, give ear to him!

Coming back full circle to the account given by ibn Ishāq of Ruḍā, we might now ask: was Ruḍā actually worshipped on the eve of Islam? It seems unlikely. The inscriptions of West Arabia dating to the centuries prior to the rise of Islam show no trace of Ruḍā, and he is not mentioned among the small number of named pagan deities in the Quran. The same is true in North Arabia and the Ḥarrah—there is nothing to suggest the survival of Ruḍā's worship past the 4th c. CE. In fact, there is so far no evidence for the worship of the old gods past the 5th c. CE in the epigraphy. The documentation we do have that dates to later centuries—although scarce—is completely monotheistic.⁵⁴ So then, how was Ruḍā remembered? It is of course possible that he remained venerated among marginal groups who did not produce inscriptions, or at least any we have discovered yet, but the uncertainties about his character and the absence of any memory of his person, supports Hawting's view, namely, that the stories of the destruction of the idols were literary tropes rather than records of actual events. This position is well supported by the epigraphic landscape of the 6th c. CE, at least at the current moment.

I would suggest that anthroponyms served as an important medium for the preservation of the knowledge of pagan deities. While such names may have fallen into disuse, or would have been less popular in monotheistic times, it is possible that names like 'abdu-ruḍā survived in tribal genealogies and gave later generations a sense of what was worshipped in pagan times. Indeed, this is exactly how ibn al-Kalbī reasons that the name *ruḍā* must be of an object of worship. These divine names—preserved only in the opaque context of

A. Prioleta, "Evidence from a new inscription regarding the goddess 'ṭ(t)rm and some remarks on the gender of deities in South Arabia", *PSAS* 42 (2012), pp. 309–318.

⁵⁴On the emergence of monotheism in Ancient South Arabia and the disappearance of the old cults, see I. Gajda, "Remarks on Monotheism in Ancient South Arabia" In C. Bakhos and M. Cook (eds.), *Islam and its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 247–256; C. Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta in Late Antiquity" In G. Fisher (ed.) *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, (Oxford, 2015), pp. 227–270. The picture is less clear in the other parts of the Arabian Peninsula due to huge gaps in documentation, but a similar trend is apparent. The Arabic inscriptions of the late 5th and 6th c. CE, so far spanning from Nagrān to northern Syria, are all of a monotheistic character, and usually Christian. The texts from Nagrān are published by C. J. Robin, A. I. Al-Ghabbān, S. F. Al-Sa'īd "Inscriptions antiques de la région de Najrān (Arabie séoudite méridionale): nouveaux jalons pour l'histoire de l'écriture, de la langue et du calendrier arabe." *CRAI* (2014), pp. 1033–1128. A 6th c. CE Christian Arabic inscription from Dūmat al-Jandal is published by L. Nehmé "New dated inscriptions (Nabataean and pre-Islamic Arabic) from a site near al-Jawf, ancient Dūmah, Saudi Arabia." *AEN* 3 (2017), pp. 121–164. Nearly a dozen new texts from the Ḥigāz have also recently been discovered and published informally on the internet. These texts invoke only one deity 'the god', spelled in various ways—*al-'ilāh*, *illāh*, and once as *Allāh*. A number of these texts have been published here: <http://alsahra.org/?p=17938>. The 6th c. CE Arabic inscriptions of the Levant are Christian as well; see the contribution of M. C. A. Macdonald in Z. Fiema, A. al-Jallad, M. C. A. Macdonald, and L. Nehmé. "Provincia Arabia: Nabataea, the Emergence of Arabic as a Written Language, and Graeco-Arabica." In G. Fisher (ed.) *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, (Oxford, 2015), pp. 373–433.

theophoric compounds—could be drawn on when crafting ‘smashing idols’ tales, whether in the early Islamic period or even earlier. This could explain how, while the names of the gods were remembered, their mythological and cultic context was completely lost, hence the uncertainties regarding what exactly Ruḏaw was.

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