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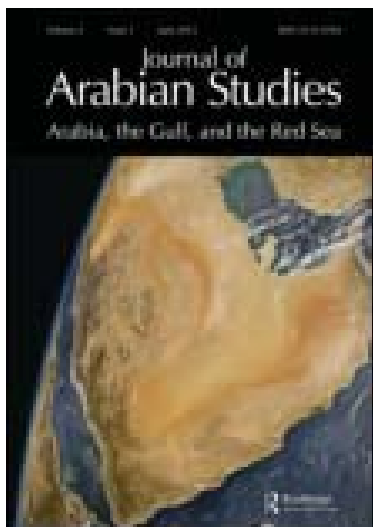
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The Origins of the Nihm Tribe of Yemen: A Window into Arabia's Past

WARREN P. ASTON

Abstract: The 1999 excavation of the Bar'an complex at Ma'rib in Yemen yielded identical Sabaean inscriptions on three votive altars. These dedication texts list the donor's grandfather as a member of the Nihm tribe, definitively establishing the presence of the tribal name to c.2,800 years ago. The name, rare in southern Arabia, can then be traced through a variety of other inscriptional, topographical and historical sources down to the present-day tribe and its lands. While the consonants NHM refer to 'dressing stone by chipping', and may appear in a variety of contexts, an etymological examination of its Semitic roots yields interesting pointers to the possible origins of the name. Multiple links in these roots to terminology such as 'consoling', 'comforting' and 'complaining' have led to the name being long associated with death and the processes of mourning. This paper, therefore, suggests the possibility of the name being specifically associated with a place of burial, perhaps a connection in the distant past to the extensive, still poorly understood, desert necropolis at the 'Alam, Ruwayk and Jidran complex north of Ma'rib. Being able to firmly document, a specific tribal and topographical name for almost three millennia is significant. Such continuity of a tribal name, perhaps unique in Arabia, would have implications for our understanding of the processes of tribal naming, structure, and movements in pre-Islamic southern Arabia generally.

Keywords: Yemen, tribes, Nihm, NHM, Bar'an temple, Ma'rib, pre-Islamic Arabia

Nihm (see [Figure 1](#)) is a prominent tribe in the north of the modern Republic of Yemen, with a total population of about 41,500 as of 2003. With its various sub-tribes, Nihm today occupies a large region centred in the mountain plateaus roughly twenty-five miles northeast of the capital, Sana'a, extending into the Jawf plains. The Jawf includes economically significant centres that once served as trade routes, such as the walled city of Baraqish. In centuries past, its ancient capital Mehle (see [Figure 2](#)) in the highlands was a centre for silver and lead mining and the production of jewellery. The Nihm is a leading member of the Bakil confederation whose affiliation with Zaydi tenets, introduced to Yemen when Hashid and Bakil were reconciled about 900 AD, have tended to keep the traditional structure of the northern tribes more intact than in the south. The rugged terrain of the interior highlands of Yemen has also been a factor contributing to the stability of the tribal areas.

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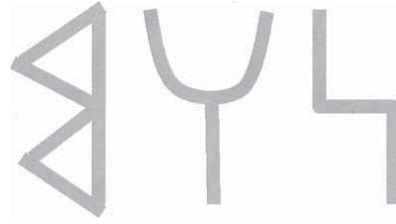


Figure 1: The epigraphic South Arabian characters for Nihm (reading R–L).



Figure 2: The ruins of Mehle, the ancient capital of Nihm, once a centre for silver mining and artisans, sit on the elevated plateau in the mountains northeast of Sana'a (Photograph by Warren P. Aston).

Paul Dresch summarized the issue of tribal stability in this way:

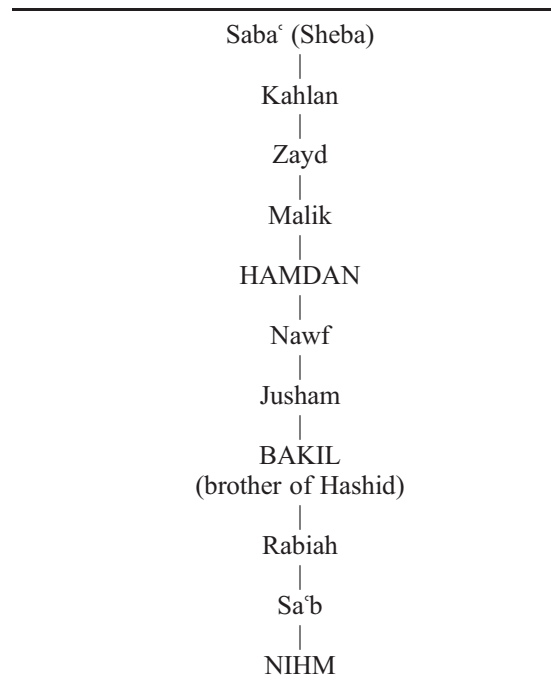
The first thing to be noted about Yemeni tribes is that they have been where they are for a very long time. The names Hashid and Bakil are pre-Islamic. Many of the lesser tribal names go back a thousand years, and there are few names of present-day tribes that one cannot trace back at least to the seventh century. Tribes as such do not move. Nor do they over-run each other.

Similarly, Robert Wilson noted:

Substantial traces of the pre-Islamic (tribal) order continued to exist well into the Islamic period. Over the past ten centuries there is little or no evidence of any major tribal movements in this part of Yemen, and the overwhelming impression is one of minimal change, even if tribal alliances have from time to time altered or developed.¹

While the foregoing comments are applicable to the Nihm tribe in a very general sense, this paper presents the evidence for this particular tribal name being substantially older than the ten centuries that Dresch and Wilson mention. As will be discussed, the origin of the tribal name may be significantly older, perhaps deriving from somewhere in the eastern Jawf near Ma'rib, now preserved only in the ancient roots of the name. It also presents indicators that, despite

¹ Wilson, "Al-Hamdani's Description of Hashid and Bakil", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 11 (1981), pp. 95–6.

Table I: Genealogy of Nihm.

this stability, the geographical extent of tribal influences can fluctuate over time. In the case of Nihm, its sphere of influence — perhaps, but not necessarily, through its alliances with other tribes — may have once extended much further than it now does.² An abbreviated genealogy of the tribe, as presently understood, has it descending through Hamdan and Bakil, as shown in [Table I](#).

1 The Bar^ʿan altars

The key development that allows a glimpse of the Nihm tribe nearly three millennia ago resulted from the 1988–99 excavation of the Bar^ʿan temple site near Ma^ʿrib, known locally as *ʿArsh Bilqis* (Throne of Bilqis, i.e. Throne of the Queen of Sheba). Prior to the project, all that remained visible at the site were the famous six columns (one broken), projecting above the sand. First identified in 1888 by Eduard Glaser as a Sabaeen temple, from an inscription on one of the columns, excavation and restoration began exactly a century later, by the Deutsche Archaologische Institut.

The excavation uncovered over twenty inscribed votive altars in varying states of preservation, ranging from almost pristine to severely damaged. Their texts are now considered to constitute some of the oldest indicators of pre-Islamic belief systems in southern Arabia. Unusually, however, three of the altars bore the same inscription, a dedication text naming their donor as a man named Bi^ʿathtar and honouring, as protocol required, various deities and local functionaries. What makes this particular inscription significant is that Bi^ʿathtar’s tribal affiliation is given in his genealogy, and it is one we know today, the Nihm. Thus, this text affords us a rare opportunity to learn about the early history of one of the prominent tribes in modern Yemen, in addition to providing indications as to the possible origin of its name.

² Robin, *Les hautes-terres du Nord-Yemen Avant l’Islam* 1 (1982), pp. 7, 20, 27, 45, 46, 68, 73.

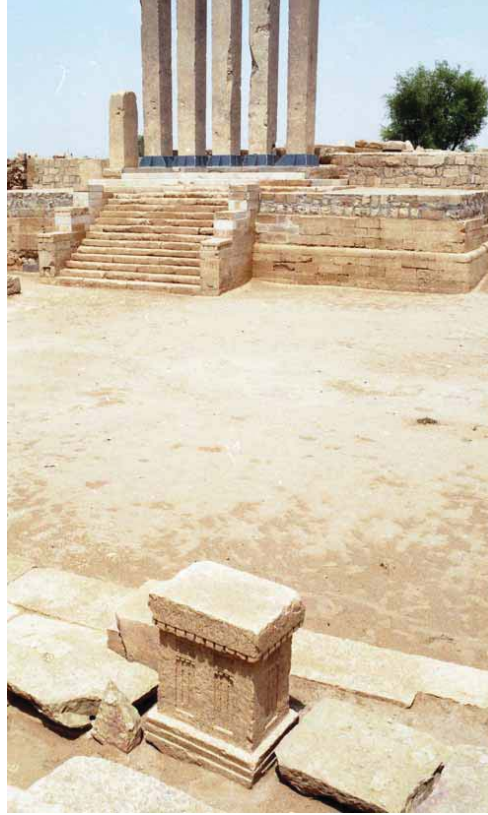


Figure 3: One of the three altars *in situ* at the excavated Bar'an temple, Ma'rib (Photograph by Warren P. Aston).

A brief review of the Bar'an site helps to place the text in its historical context. As presently understood, Bar'an probably developed from a 'sacred place' with simple structures prior to 1000 BC. It then evolved through at least three stages of construction into a more substantial temple complex, providing impressive symbolic accommodation for the moon god Ilmaqah. The three limestone altars donated by Bi'athtar appear to predate a fourth period of temple construction beginning in the late sixth- or fifth-century BC, the height of the Sabaean kingdom. At some point near the beginning of the Christian era the temple was largely destroyed, quite possibly during the campaign of Aelius Gallus about 25 BC. Repairs and modifications were made to the temple, but by then it had lost much of its original significance and further declined.

Concomitant with the declining role of the pagan gods was the steady decline of the overland trade caravans as shipping via the Red Sea developed. By the late fourth-century AD, a second destruction of the temple forecourt took place. Two centuries later, as the nearby Ma'rib dam fell into disuse, the area lost much of its population and the temple site was gradually covered, almost completely, by desert sands (see Figures 3 and 4).³

³ Vogt, Herberg, and Roring, *Arsh Bilqis: The Temple of Almaqah of Bar'an in Ma'rib* (2000) summarizes the site's history. Examples of other inscriptions are included in notes by Nebes, pp. 16–8 in the same paper. One of the three NHM altars is pictured in Simpson (ed.), *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen* (2002), pp. 164, 168. The English rendering of the altar inscription given in the catalogue has an error in the genealogy of Bi'athtar, reading 'son of Sawad from the tribe Naw' from Nihm'; it also states that the altar is the 'best preserved of three altars found in the Bar'an temple'. While it is the best preserved of the three altars bearing this particular inscription, over twenty altars of an essentially similar design were taken from this site.



Figure 4: The altar showing the NHM inscription (Photographs by Warren P. Aston).

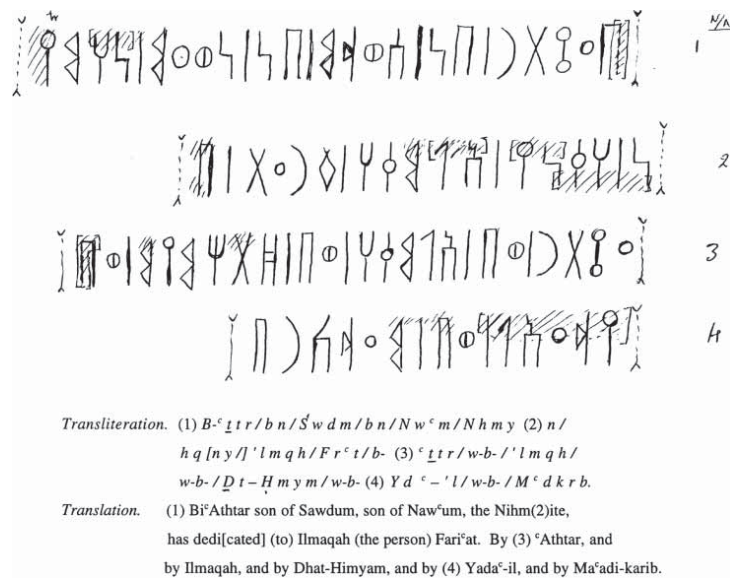


Figure 5: The Bar'an altar inscription (text transliteration and translation courtesy of Kenneth A. Kitchen).

Each of the three altars carries the text shown in [Figure 5](#) above. As noted above, the altar text informs us that the supplicant Bi'athtar, son of Sawdum and grandson of Naw'um of the Nihm, donated the altars to the temple. A female person, Fari'at, is dedicated to Ilmaqah, which, it is presumed, means that she would be admitted to the religious community of this deity and serve at the temple in some way. The name of Ilmaqah is then invoked again, together with two lesser deities, 'Athtar and Dhat Himyam, followed by the personal names of the local Mukarrib, Yada'il, and a high-ranking official, Ma'adi-karib.⁴

Several points emerge from this text. In the first place, the uncommon fact that three altars bear the name of a single donor underscores Bi'athtar's status and wealth and suggests something of the prominence of his tribe. As the Ma'rib area does not lie within the present boundaries of the Nihm tribe, the altar's location raises the possibility that the tribe's influence once extended as far as Ma'rib. Of course, it remains possible that the Bar'an temple was simply the closest or most

⁴ Transliteration and translation provided by Professor Kenneth A. Kitchen of Liverpool, May 2001. The Bar'an texts are expected to eventually become available online from the University of Pisa's *Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions* at <http://csai.humnet.unipi.it>

convenient for Bi'athtar to make his offering. While all this does not suggest an origin for the tribal name, it nevertheless firmly anchors it to this location and period.

As to the dating of the three altars, Christian Robin initially assigned a period of between the seventh and sixth centuries BC.⁵ Such dating seems to fit the altar text, which refers to the ruler Yada'il, who may be the prolific builder Yada'il Dharih I (c.630 BC), the best known of the Sabaean kings, or perhaps a later ruler, Yada'il Bayyin I (c.580 BC).⁶ Subsequently, however, Bi'athtar's three altars were more firmly designated to an earlier period of the temple construction, to the period around the eighth to seventh centuries BC.⁷

Finally, as Naw'um of the Nihm was the grandfather of Bi'athtar, the tribal name itself in this instance must certainly date back at least two generations — perhaps fifty or more years — and thus belong somewhere between the ninth and eighth centuries BC.

2 Later references to Nihm

In tracing the tribal name to the present, after the Ba'ran texts, the next earliest written reference comes from the prophet Muhammad himself, in a diplomatic letter addressed to the southern tribes of Yemen, including Nihm, written about 620 AD.⁸ While few Muslim writers dealt with the pre-Islamic period, the highly esteemed Yemeni historian al-Hamdani's geographical work *Sifat Jazirat al-Arab*,⁹ and the tenth volume of *al-Iklil*,¹⁰ both written about 900 AD, mention Nihm often. Importantly, Hamdani discusses the Bakil tribes in about the first-century AD.¹¹ While he does not name the constituent tribes for this earlier period, Hamdani's clear inference is that Nihm was among them. This then gives us a probable reference to the tribe of at least 50–100 AD, with the implication that the tribe existed much earlier still. Later Muslim writings, such *Kitab mu'jam al-buldan* (the *Dictionary of Countries*) by the Greek-Syrian scholar Yaquut al-Hamawi (1179–1229 AD), also often refer to the tribal name.¹²

Since that era, the name is easily documented through the mapping done of the Yemen highlands down through the centuries. Perhaps the most significant of these is the 1751 map of Asia, 'Asie 1' by the French cartographer Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville (1697–1782). Not only is this the earliest known map recording NHM, but it was based itself on much earlier sources, notably the Arab geographers Idrisi (1100–65), Abu al-Fida (1273–1331) and the Turkish geographer Kâtip Çelebi (1609–57). Unlike his predecessors and most contemporaries, Anville used a 'modern', strictly scientific, approach in his map-making, insisting on documentation for every feature depicted on his maps.

The large blank spaces on the map of the Arabian Peninsula that resulted highlight the ignorance within the Western world of inland Arabia.¹³ In part to counter this deficit, the Danish King

⁵ Robin et al. (eds), *Yemen au Pays de la Reine de Saba* (1997), p. 144.

⁶ Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia 2* (2000), p. 744.

⁷ Nebes, "Zur Chronologie der Inschriften aus dem Bar'an-Tempel", *Archaologische Berichte aus dem Yemen* 10 (2005), p. 115.

⁸ Al-Akwa, *al-Watha'iq as-Siyasiyya al-Yamaniyya* (1976), p. 110.

⁹ Al-Hamdani, *Sifat Jazirat al-Arab*, ed. Müller (1884–91), pp. 49, 81, 83, 109–10, 126, 135, 167–8. Also see: Robin, *Al-Hamdani: A Great Yemeni Scholar. Studies on the Millennial Anniversary of Al-Hamdani* (1986); Lofgren, "Al-Hamdani", in Lewis et al. (eds), *Encyclopedia of Islam 3* (1971), pp. 124–5; Lofgren (ed.), *Suedarabisches Mustabih* 46 (1953), pp. 1019–22.

¹⁰ Al-Hamdani, *Al-Iklil*, trans. Nabih (1940).

¹¹ Robin, *Les hautes-terres du Nord-Yemen avant l'Islam 1* (1982), pp. 27, 73. See also the numerous references to Nihm in von Wissman and Glaser, *Zur Geschichte und Landeskunde von Alt-Sudarabien* (1964), pp. 82, 87, 96–7, 150, 247, 307–8, 320, 322, 370 and maps of the tribal location, pp. 84, 210, 295.

¹² Al-Hamawi, *Kitab mu'jam al-buldan*, available as Wustefeld (trans.), *Jacut's Geographisches Wörterbuch 3* (1873), p. 721.

¹³ Tibbetts, *Arabia in Early Maps* (1978), map 281, pp. 29–30, 166–8.

Frederick V sponsored an expedition to Arabia during 1761–7. The sole survivor was the German-born surveyor Carsten Niebuhr (1733–1815) whose map of western Yemen drawn in 1763 was based on his own travels in the highlands and correctly shows ‘Nehhm’ as a general tribal area located northeast of Sana’a. In his meticulous account, Niebuhr described Nehhm variously as a ‘Lordship’, an independent ‘State of Yemen’, and as a ‘principality’, whose ‘warlike’



Figure 6: Niebuhr's 1763 map of Yemen resulting from the 1761–7 Danish expedition, showing the 'Lordship' of Nehhm.
 Source: Hansen, *Arabia Felix: The Danish Expedition of 1761–1767*, trans. McFarlane (1964), pp. 232–3.

shaikh ruled over a few towns, together with ‘many villages on a mountain’.¹⁴ Niebuhr’s work and maps were to provide Europeans with their most accurate information about southern Arabia for more than a century to come (see Figure 6).

Anville’s map, a primary catalyst in the sending of the expedition, was updated and republished by several publishers from 1794 onwards with a notation acknowledging Niebuhr’s additions and improvements. More than a century passed before the next known reference to the place was made by an outsider. In 1869, a young French Jew, Joseph Halevy, travelled through the area searching for antiquities. His written account describes the ‘independent hill-canton of Nehm on the arid eastern downs’ northeast of Sana’a.¹⁵ Halevy’s local guide, Hayyim Habshush, also a Jew, kept a little-known account of their journey, in which he refers often to the district of Nihm and to the Nihm tribe who occupied the area.¹⁶ Without exception, all known maps depicting Nihm show it centred in the mountains about forty kilometres northeast of Sana’a. The district is large, well-known and remains associated with the tribe after which it is named. The NHM consonants remain constant despite variations in the English rendering of the name, when earlier maps are examined. Table II shows that the consonants have almost always remained intact despite the passage of time:

Table II: Spelling of NHM in maps.

‘Nehm’ in Ritter’s 1852 map ¹⁷
‘Nehm’ in an 1897 geography ¹⁸
‘Baham’ in a 1939 survey map ¹⁹
‘Nehm’ and ‘Nahm’ in a 1961 Gazetteer ²⁰
‘Nahm’ in a 1962 survey map and a 1968 tribal map ²¹
‘Nehem’ in a 1976 government map ²²
‘Nihm’ in a UK government map (198) ²³ and a Swiss survey map (1985) ²⁴

The tribal name is also found in the texts written on palm-leaf stocks and wooden sticks recording the important events and everyday transactions of ordinary people in ancient Yemen.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Beschreibung von Arabien* (1772) and *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und den umliegenden Landern* (1774, 1778). The map also appears in Hansen, *Arabia Felix: The Danish Expedition of 1761–67*, trans. McFarlane (1964), pp. 232–3.

¹⁵ Hogarth, *The Penetration of Arabia* (1904), pp. 200–3.

¹⁶ Habshush, *Travels in Yemen*, trans. Goitein (1941), pp. 24–31.

¹⁷ Ritter, *Einleitung zur Allgemeinen Vergleichenden Geographie* [Introduction to General Comparative Geography] 1:10,000,000 (Berlin: 1852), sheet facing p. 272.

¹⁸ De Saint-Martin and Rousselet (comp.), *Nouveau dictionnaire de géographie universelle* 7 (1897), p. 437.

¹⁹ HM Govt, General Staff Geographical Section (GSGS), map of Yemen showing “BAHAM”, from a misreading of the name (1939).

²⁰ US Dept of the Interior, *Arabian Peninsula: Official Standard Names Approved by the US Board on Geographic Names* (1961), pp. 323.

²¹ Schmidt, *Yemen: The Unknown War* (1968), map facing p. 15 and a 1962 GSGS map of Yemen.

²² Althamary, map of Yemen, scale 1:1,000,000 (Sana’a: Yemen Arab Republic Government, 1976).

²³ HM Govt, Ministry of Overseas Development, Directorate of Overseas Surveys, map of Yemen Arab Republic, edn 1-DOS1978, series YAR 500 (K 465), 1:500,000 (1978), printed for the Government of the Yemen Arab Republic.

²⁴ Yemen Arab Republic, Survey Authority, Sana’a, map of the Yemen Arab Republic (Zurich: Orell Fussli Graphic Arts, 1985).

Many thousands have been recovered (over 3,000 inscribed pieces are kept in the National Museum in Sana'a alone), many written in a previously unknown South Arabian cursive script, currently designated as 'minuscule' or the *Zabur* script. Dating back as far as the eighth-century BC, the palm-leaf stocks and wooden sticks record contracts, debts, name lists, accounts, letters and decrees. There is now some evidence that such stocks and sticks may also have been used by rulers to keep as secondary copies of decrees carved in stone or cast in metal. This method seems to have been used until about the fourth-century AD and scholars are still working to extract the information the texts contain.²⁵ A number of these little-known records contain references to the Nihm tribe, but most remain unpublished, such as the ancient palm-leaf stock shown in Figure 7.²⁶

This is a partial transcription:

1. ḏ-Nsn
2. bn Hsmr
3. **Nhmyn**
4. ḏ-Yfm
5. bn Ḍ'bm
6. bn Mrt
7. ḏ-Ḥrhmw
8. ḏ-Wsr
9. ḏ-'sq
10. bn'wslm

More recently, the tribal name has emerged in other early South Arabian contexts. NHM is now attested in several carved Minaean, Hadramitic and Sabaean inscriptions from various sites in Yemen. Two examples follow:

Figure 8 (see below). Transcription: šḥr Mḥbḏm **Nhmn**

Figure 9 (see below). Transcription:

- 1 ... (d)l w-bhn-(sw)
- 2 bhny Hn' ḏ-'(ḏ)[..]—
- 3 n sl' Nbḏ'ḏ[tr b]—
- 4 ḥtn ywm **nhm**....

3 The etymology of the name

Several points regarding the tribal name are revealing. In attempting to understand its possible origins, the first point to note is that the consonants NHM are exceedingly rare; they do not appear anywhere else in Arabia as a toponym. NHM is attested only rarely in southern

²⁵ Ryckmans, "Origin and Evolution of South Arabian Minuscule Writing on Wood", *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 12 (2001), pp. 223–35. Also see Ryckmans, Müller, and Abdullah, *Textes du Yémen antique inscrits sur bois* [Yemen Ancient Texts Inscribed on Wood] (1994) and Frantsouzoff, "Hadramitic Documents Written on Palm-Leaf Stalks", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 29 (1999), pp. 55–66.

²⁶ A property agreement mentioning NIHM, recorded as a Zabur text, was shown to the author by Shaikh Abdulrab Abu Luhum in Sana'a, 1 Nov. 2000.



Figure 7: This ancient palm-leaf stock is one of several known cursive ‘miniscule’ texts that reference the Nihm tribe (Sabaean text YM 11748 is reproduced courtesy of the CSAI, University of Pisa).



Figure 8: NHM appears in reference to the tribe in these inscriptions from Yemen: Sabaean text BynM 217 (reproduced courtesy of the CSAI, University of Pisa).



Figure 9: NHM appears in reference to the tribe in these inscriptions from Yemen:
Minaean text DhM 386 (reproduced courtesy of the CSAI, University of Pisa).

Arabian writings as a personal or tribal name; it also appears a handful of times in northern Arabian Safaitic texts.²⁷

NHM itself has two closely related Semitic roots: NḤM and NHM. The first root, NḤM, has the voiceless pharyngeal *h* consonant, giving it the basic meaning of ‘to comfort, console, to be sorry’ and is used in Arabic (as *naḥama*) to refer to a ‘soft groan, sigh, moan’. Likewise, in ancient Hebrew this root is commonly used in connection with mourning a death. Indeed, David Damrosch notes that:

It appears twenty-five times in the narrative books of the Bible, and in every case it is associated with death. In family settings, it is applied in instances involving the death of an immediate family member (parent, sibling or child); in national settings, it has to do with the survival or impending extermination of an entire people. At heart, *naḥam* means ‘to mourn’, to come to terms with a death.²⁸

The second root, NHM, has the simple voiceless laryngeal *h* and is also found in Hebrew where it means to ‘roar’, ‘complain’ and ‘be hungry’. In ancient Egyptian the root refers ‘to roar, thunder, shout’, which is similar to the Arabic meanings ‘to growl, groan, roar, suffer from hunger, to complain’.²⁹ This association with hunger may be connected to the fasting that was often part of mourning for the dead in ancient Yemen and still in many cultures today. It is this second root, NHM, that appears in every known occurrence of the name in epigraphic South Arabian text, whether Sabaean, Hadramitic or Minean in origin. Here, it usually refers to ‘dressed masonry’ or the ‘dressing of stone by chipping’,³⁰ as in the following examples:

²⁷ Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions* (1971), p. 602. Other listings of pre-Islamic place names in southern Arabia such as Abdullah, *Die Ortsnamen in den Alt-sudarabischen Inschriften* (1982), Groom, *A Dictionary of Arabic Topography and Place Names* (1983), and the exhaustive tribal listings in Kahhalah, *Muʿjam Qabaʿil al-ʿArab* (1968) do not list NHM at all.

²⁸ Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (1987), pp. 128–9.

²⁹ Parunak, “A Semantic Survey of NHM”, *Biblica* 56 (1975), pp. 512–32; Scharbert, “Der Schmerz in Alten Testament”, *Bonner Biblische Beiträge* 8 (1955), pp. 62–5.

³⁰ Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic: Sabaean Dialect* (1982), p. 296.

- NHMyn is rendered as ‘stonemason’ in a Sabaeen dedicatory text from the site of Urwa (Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions [CSAI] text GI 1637).
- NHy[Mt]N is translated as ‘the stone polishers’ on the three Sabaeen temple inscriptions at Haram (CSAI texts Haram 16, 17, 19).
- [NH]Mt refers to ‘polished stones’ in a Hadramitic text from al-Bin (CSAI text RES 2687).³¹

While this general association with working in stone is consistent, surely providing an indication of the early history of the tribal name, the Arabic, Hebrew and Egyptian cognates noted earlier may also hold valuable clues. The foregoing factors can be summarized as follows:

- The tribal name is rare, appearing nowhere else in southern Arabia as a toponym.
- The name is archaeologically attested at the Baʿran site as early as 900–800 BC.
- The Baʿran site at Maʿrib is west of the tribe’s modern-day location, suggesting an earlier period of greater influence.
- The roots of the name generally link to ‘comforting, consoling, moaning’ and especially to ‘suffering hunger’ and ‘complaining’.
- In the southern Arabian texts the name refers specifically to the dressing of masonry, or to those engaged in that occupation.

Coming later in time than the Baʿran texts, a variety of other sources then document the tribal name in its present location from c.600–700 BC down to the present, as shown in Table III and Figure 10.

4 A link to a burial area?

The region surrounding Maʿrib and Sirwah contains perhaps the highest concentration of ancient cities, dams, temples and burial sites in Arabia. Further west lie the Minaean capitals of Qarnaw and Baraqish that controlled important stages of the early trade route.³² But perhaps of greater relevance to the story of Nihm is the enormous burial complex spread over the ‘Alam, Ruwayk and Jidran ridges on the edge of the Sabatayn desert about 100 km northeast of Maʿrib. The many hundreds of above-ground stone tombs and alignments here were first reported in 1936 by St John Philby.

While no inscriptions have been found, the circular tombs are estimated to date from the third millennium BC.³³ All this suggests a plausible hypothesis to account for the tribal name, the scenario also providing possible reasons for the prominence of the tribe and the essential stability of its location for nearly five millennia.

5 The possible origins of Nihm

Archaeologists assume that the construction of the immense necropolis at ‘Alam, Ruwayk and Jidran in the third millennium BC developed initially to serve outlying desert communities. Constructed of locally mined limestone slabs, the burial areas were perhaps neutral places where the

³¹ Full details of these texts can be located at <http://csai.humnet.unipi.it>.

³² Jenner, *Yemen Rediscovered* (1983), p. 125.

³³ Steimer-Herbet, “Jabal Ruwaik: Megaliths in Yemen”, *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 29 (1999), pp. 179–82.

Table III: Dating Nihm.

900 BC	Bar'an inscriptions refer to Nihm in 900–800 BC period
800 BC	Bar'an Nihm texts produced in 800–700 BC period
700 BC	
600 BC	Various carved texts refer to Nihm
500 BC	
400 BC	
300 BC	
200 BC	
100 BC	
0	
AD 100	Hamdani infers Nihm is part of Bakil tribes in this era
200	
300	
400	
500	
600	Nihm mentioned in Prophet Muhammad epistle
700	
800	Al-Kalbi reference to Nihm
900	Hamdani's references to Nihm in Iklil and Sifat
1000	
1100	
1200	
1300	Likely sources for Anville's 1751 map
1400	
1500	
1600	
1700	
1800	Numerous maps and historical references to Nihm
1900	Numerous maps and historical references to Nihm
2014	Nihm tribe in same geographical location after a minimum of <i>c.</i> 2,900 years ago



Figure 10: Many hundreds of ancient burial tombs line the ridges at 'Alam, Ruwayk and Jidran in the desert north of Ma'rib (Photograph by Warren P. Aston).

tribes could bury their dead without interruption. Dressing stone for the tombs was then quite possibly later expanded to also cater to the needs of the growing Ma'rib area. Such an activity would have undoubtedly been connected to the substantial need for building materials for the nearby cities and the great dam.

Additionally, closer burial areas were needed for the ruling class; a below-ground area of multi-level burial tombs catering for more than twenty thousand burials, for example, was constructed adjacent to the Awwam temple at Ma'rib, with a smaller number of elaborate above-ground mausoleums. There are, of course, also a number of smaller burial areas of great antiquity scattered at various other locations of modern Nihm.

The Nihm name may thus have developed in the eastern Jawf in connection with the construction of a burial area or areas. Such a scenario would neatly account for the etymology of the root of the name ('mourning, consoling,' etc.) and also of its particular application in the early kingdoms of southern Arabia (dressing masonry). Any group of people who developed expertise in stone masonry and, perhaps, control of the relevant resources would have assured their wealth and prominence, something implied in Bi'athtar's generous offering of *three* altars at the Bar'an temple.

Over the centuries, the continuing desiccation of the region saw most of the desert population gradually retreat to the more certain water sources at Ma'rib. When the dam at Ma'rib fell into disrepair, the Nihm likely moved further west in the Jawf, into the adjacent mountain plateaus where it is now centred.

The proximity to other centres such as Baraqish and Ma'in, where the trade routes converged, would have allowed a natural expansion of tribal influence over time. In this scenario, the community of Nihm, the stone cutters, now assured their prosperity and influence by mining and working silver and other metals. A millennium after the tombs were abandoned, however, the origin and significance of the tribal name would be largely lost to its members, preserved only — however faintly — in its etymology.

6 Conclusions

While this remains a reconstructed and theoretical history, none of its components are disputed. All are now well established. Chronologically, they hang together well, tracing a plausible story of a corner of early southern Arabia. They shed light on Yemen's ancient cities, kingdoms and their belief systems, on migrations and industries that have played their roles in the history of the region and in the emergence of the modern Yemeni state.

Certainly, the possible earlier link of the name to the large-scale construction of burial tombs in the Neolithic era remains conjectural. We can hope that eventually conditions will allow exploratory work in Yemen to resume and perhaps shed more light on the earlier period. In the meantime, however, the preservation of this rare name for nearly three millennia at least offers an informative window into the little-known world of ancient South Arabia.

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