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Appendix 2: Some Notes on the Tribal Origins of NHM

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Abstract: In this paper I will propose some answers that may account for the Nihm tribal name and will assume that some of my data will have some commonality with other tribes in the region. I will also argue that a little-known account of travel across Arabia anciently appears to confirm some historical aspects of the tribe in question.

Appendix 2

Some Notes on the Tribal Origins of NHM

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At the outset, I wish to express sincere appreciation to Paul Dresch, Christian Robin, Remy Audoin, Yusuf Abdullah of Sana'a, Robert Wilson and to Nigel Groom for their valuable comments and insights in the preparation of this paper. An examination into the history of one of the prominent Bakil tribes of the Yemeni high-lands, the *Nihm* (usually rendered as *Nahm/Nehem*) from historical, linguistic and geographical perspectives has the potential to reveal something to us of tribal structure generally in the pre-Islamic period. For example, the findings of this study may go some way toward dating tribal origins, understanding the processes of tribal naming and to answering questions concerning the extent of movements within the confederations. In this paper I will propose some answers that may account for the *Nihm* tribal name and will assume that some of my data will have some commonality with other tribes in the region. I will also argue that a little-known account of travel across Arabia anciently appears to confirm some historical aspects of the tribe in question. It also fits well with what is now known

with regard to the trade-routes in southern Arabia. Unlike most of Arabia, the mountainous terrain and relative fertility of the peninsula's southwest corner - the present day Republic of Yemen - has kept many tribal areas there relatively intact over time from the ravages of conquest, famine and migration. Another factor contributing to the stability and cohesiveness of tribes in the Zaydi influence in Islam which has dominated the northern tribes since its introduction ca. AD 900. Both of these factors are relevant when we consider the *Nihm*, whose territory is centered on the rugged hill-country overlooking Wadi Jawf, some 25 miles NE of Sana'a.

Responding specifically to the conventional concept that some major changes to the pre-Islamic Yemeni tribes is indicated in the tribal data left us by the tenth-century historian, al-Hamdani, Robert Wilson concluded that:

...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.

...the movements suggested by [al-Hamdani]...were much smaller and more gradual that some of al-Hamdani's statements would lead us to believe.¹

What we can deduce of the history and origins of the *Nihm* seems to echo the general comments that Wilson makes about the southern tribes as a whole. I propose that the relative stability of the tribal areas in north Yemen at least is not confined to the last thousand years alone but may well reflect the overall situation existing in much earlier periods.

Let us first consider the tribal name. While it is true that many present-day Yemeni tribal names derive from a common ancestor,² the Nihm, in common with other tribes bearing a simple proper name, seem more likely to have taken their name from a specific location. In the case of the Nihm the name may date as far back as the Neolithic. The first indication that this may be so appear when the name is examined.

Two closely related roots for the name are possible: NH.M (with the H aspirated) and NHM, with related - but not identical - connotations. The basic meaning of NH.M is “to comfort, console,” with derivations extending this meaning to include “compassion” and “rest.” While the Akkadian NAAMU(M) is possibly the oldest cognate,³ the NH.M root itself first appears with clear meaning in Ugaritic (NH.M = “console”).⁴ In Arabic, NAH.AMA refers to “a soft groan, sigh, moan” and is usually applied in the third person. The Hebrew form is used extensively with reference to “consoling” the bereaved and “mourning” another’s death, as well as in numerous Old Testament texts referring to what is translated as the “repentance of God.”⁵ There are also occurrences of NH.M in the Old Testament as a personal name, “NAH.AM” (1 Chronicles 4:19), “NEH.UM” (Nehemiah 7:7) and most prominently the prophet NAH.UM (the “consoler”) whose origin may be Capernaum (“village of Nahum”), probably the present-day site Tell-Hum.⁶ It is the second root, NHM, that appears in the modern Arabic name of the tribal area. NHM is also found in biblical Hebrew, meaning to “roar” (Isaiah 5:29-30), or “to complain” or to “be hungry.” Similarly, in ancient Egyptian we have two variations, NHM meaning “thunder, shout,” and NHMHM, “roar, thunder” and in Arabic “growl, groan, roar, suffer from hunger, complain.” It must be appreciated that although both roots are relatively common in the Hebrew biblical corpus, both in fact are extremely rare in any southern Arabian context. Lancaster Harding’s *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions* lists, for example, only a single occurrence of NHM in

the southern Arabian dialects (listing a personal name in Hdrami) in addition to fourteen instances where it appears in north Arabian Safaitic texts.⁷ In view of the etymology of the NHM name, the recent finding of a burial area in the hills of Nihm overlooking the Jawf plains may be especially relevant. The difficulties of attempting fieldwork in the Jawf have always been considerable, yet some progress has been made in recent years to establishing the beginnings of a historical profile of the area. Construction of the tombs at Nihm may date to 3000 BC or earlier, with ongoing construction taking place until perhaps about AD 1000.⁸ Another, better-known, burial area, first reported by Philby in 1936,⁹ lies not far distant in presently disputed territory on the Ruwayk, ’Alam Abyadh and ’Alam Aswad outcrops (and reportedly also on the nearby Jidran ridge) NE of Marib. The thousands of circular rock structures comprising this site remain unexamined, so far as I am aware, by professional researchers. While outside the present boundaries of the Nihm and its sub-tribes, these tombs appear to be essentially the same as the Nihm tombs in their method of construction and their elevated situation.¹⁰

[A recent photograph of a typical burial tomb is shown on your handout.]

So far as the antiquity of the tribal name is concerned, maps and historical references attest that it has been known as such since pre-Islamic times. The earliest map I have been able to locate to date is ’Anville’s 1751 map of Asia showing NEHEM in the same position relative to Sana’a that all later maps do. This map is more significant than the others as it was based on the works of medieval Arab geographers such as Idrisi, Abu’l-Fida and Katib Chelebi.¹¹ Only a decade after ’Anville’s map, another map showing NEHHM was produced by the cartographer Carsten Niebuhr, the sole survivor of the Danish expedition to southern Arabia. Niebuhr also left us first-hand descriptions of the tribal area in his day, recording it as an independent “State of Yemen,”

one of thirteen so listed in addition to the dominions of the Imam at Sana'a.¹² More than a century passes before the next known reference to the place, the 1869 exploration of the region by Joseph Halevy who referred to the "independent hill-canton of NEHM on the arid eastern downs" northeast of Sana'a.¹³ Numerous other maps printed in succeeding years confirm the name and location of NEHEM or an equivalent toponym.¹⁴ I have listed examples of these chronologically on the hand-out. The earliest historical reference to the tribal name located thus far comes from the Prophet Muhammad himself, in diplomatic correspondence addressed to the southern tribes of Arabia about AD 620.¹⁵ Considering the scant attention paid to the pagan period by the early Moslem historians and genealogists, the Nihm are referred to often, as for example in al-Kalbi's *Kitab al-Asnam*, written about AD 821.¹⁶ The more prolific al-Hamdani mentions the tribe in his *Kitab Jazirat al-Arab*, a geographical work,¹⁷ and also in the tenth book of his *Al Iklil*, listing it as part of the Bakil confederation.¹⁸ Al-Hamdani also makes reference to the Bakil tribes in about the first century AD and while the constituent tribes of Bakil are not always defined in his writings we can reasonably **infer** that Nihm was one of them.¹⁹

Most unexpectedly, the name also surfaces in the English translation of the First Book of Nephi, claimed to be the record of a small Israelite group (whom I will hereafter term the "Lehites" after their leader) which escaped the destruction of Jerusalem ca. 600 BC and traveled for some eight years across Arabia. This account was first published in 1829 as part of the LDS or Mormon canon of scripture. The narrative is brief but essentially tells of travel by the Lehites in a south-southeast direction from the Jerusalem area (ie. paralleling the western coast of the Red Sea), then encamping for, quote: "the space of a time," from which we can assume that they had reached a place where crops could be grown before continuing their journey.

Then follows the death of Ishmael, a prominent member of the group, the text informing us that was then buried "at the place which *was* called Nahom,"²⁰ wording which strongly implies that the name was that already given to the place by local people. The account then links the burial at Nahom with other events peculiarly appropriate for a place bearing such a name - a period of mourning (of which fasting, perhaps the "hunger" we see in the root, may have been an integral part); an angry rebellion by some of the party and concerns being expressed about perishing from hunger in the desert. Although the source may seem anomalous there seems little reason to doubt that the "Nahom" in the writings of Nephi is in fact the tribal area of *Nihm* to which al-Hamdani referred. If so, this gives us a clear reference to the tribes of Hamdan some twelve centuries earlier than any other reference extant. This apparent survival of the name - unattested elsewhere in Arabia - is further strengthened by the striking etymological correspondences of the name to the events recorded by Nephi, which are so clear as to not require further comment. But there is more.

The First Book of Nephi then has the Lehite group departing "nearly eastward" immediately upon leaving Nahom. We are safe in stating that desert travelers in any age would have encamped on the relatively quite fertile Jawf plain, perhaps in the general vicinity of where the ruins of Baraqish or Ma'in now lie, rather than on the barren slopes of Nihm. It is surely significant, therefore, that the ancient incense route, representing available water sources as well as suitable topography, did in fact turn eastward in this same area, later veering southeast toward Shabwah and thence to the port of Qana/Bir Ali.²¹ If the Lehite group, however, traveled *nearly* due east as stated in their record, their course from the Jawf valley would eventually have led them onto the Mahra plateau before reaching the uniquely fertile Qamar coast of southern Dhofar, a sequence that fits the subsequent account remarkably well. For several years now my wife, myself and several colleagues have begun

fieldwork at this unusually fertile location and at this Semiar in 1993, Paolo Costa read a paper summarizing his preliminary findings.²² I am fully cognizant of the perils in undertaking a reconstruction of the history of any place, but with the foregoing in mind it becomes possible to now attempt to account for this tribal name with the following scenario: The tribal name likely had its genesis as early as the Neolithic period, deriving rather clearly from the construction and use of a large and centrally located burial place in the foothills, providing the requisite “high place” favored by Semites and also overlooking the [then] fertile and well-populated Wadi Jawf. It remains possible that a link exists between this burial site and that of the Ruwayk tombs, suggesting that the original tribal area may have been more extensive than it now is.

The association of the name with both burial and mourning is clear, thus leading us to the concept that it may have been considered a neutral enclave where the tribes of that region could bury their dead. Control of the site(s) and the resulting close identification of the name with a local tribe or tribal confederation can be confidently postulated at an early period, although this process may not have been complete until near the end of the pre-Islamic period. Other than the possible reduction of the area encompassed referred to earlier, there is no indication of actual tribal relocation at any stage. Indeed, the opposite seem to be true. The near proximity of Nihm to the cities and settlements that developed in the Jawf must have contributed significantly to the establishment of the site as an accessible burial place utilizing the otherwise unproductive surrounding hills. Further, converging trade routes for incense and other commodities at that same juncture for many centuries would have helped assure its importance and also have ensured transmission of the name throughout the region. With the decline of the incense trade and its associated city-states at the same time as the increasing desiccation of central Arabia, the resultant population loss would have resulted in Nihm eventually ceasing to have more than a purely local importance.

The millennium or more of virtual disuse since then would have caused the dwindling of its original significance in the collective memory of its people until the true origins of the tribal name were largely lost. The date presented in this study suggest strongly that the Nihm tribal name ultimately derives from its geographical location and that it appears to have maintained this same position for some twenty-six centuries. This makes it seem more likely that a substantially greater degree of stability and continuity prevailed among the tribes of Hamdan than has been presumed heretofore.

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