ahl Khurāsān are used more commonly to designate the nucleus of the ʿAbbasid army. It is only in accounts beginning with the onset of the civil war that the term ʿabnāʾ al-dawla appears with any frequency. This does not refute their claim to a special status, but it does serve to restrict that claim to the inhabitants of Baghdad at the requisite time, for whom such an assertion was sustainable. The caliphal move to Sāmarrāʾ eventually weakened their position and rendered their claim moot. References to the ʿabnāʾ al-dawla disappear before the end of the Sāmarrān interlude.

The term ʿabnāʾ is used in a variety of permutations to indicate a connection to a larger grouping that is not necessarily genealogical. One finds ʿabnāʾ ahl Khurāsān, ʿabnāʾ al-dawla, ʿabnāʾ al-Shīʿa, ʿabnāʾ al-ʿAṭrāk, all indicating a connection to a larger entity, whether geographic, political, religious, or ethnic.

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Abraha

Abraha was a Christian king of South Arabia in the middle of the sixth century C.E. According to Muslim sources, he attacked Mecca with the “People of the Elephant” in about 570 C.E.

The name “Abraha” is said in Muslim sources to be of Abyssinian origin, meaning “bright face” (wajh abyaʿ; see Ibn Hishām, al-Tījān, 136; Ibn Saʿīd, 1:119). Islamic reports often add to Abraha’s name the nickname al-Ashram (“Split-Nose”). The tip of his nose is said to have been cut off during a duel with his rival, Aryaṭ, in Yemen (see below). According to another explanation (Ibn Manẓūr, s.v. šr-m), a stone struck his nose during the “Expedition of the Elephant.”

Abraha is also referred to as Ibn al-Ṣabbāḥ and as Abū ʿYakṣūm, but some doubts have been raised about whether all these references were to the same person. In fact, Yahyā b. Sallām (d. 200/815) suggests two different identities of the person who raided Mecca with the “People of the Elephant.” He was either Abraha b. al-ʿAbbās, a Yemeni whom the Abyssinians appointed as a king in Yemen, or he was the Abyssinian Abū ʿYakṣūm (Ḥūd b. Muḥakkaḵ, 4:534). Al-Suhaylī (d. 581/1185) has deduced from these versions that the Æṣṭuṣrī (Yemeni) Abraha b. al-Ṣabbāḥ is not the Abyssinian Abū ʿYakṣūm (al-Suhaylī, 1:54).

The name “Abraha b. al-Ṣabbāḥ” refers not only to the king with the elephant but also to an earlier king in Yemen, who reportedly reigned at least 150 years before Abraha of the Elephant. The former is said to have been a great scholar and leader. Both Abraha b. al-Ṣabbāḥ and the later Abraha appear on a list of Yemeni kings recorded by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889). The later Abraha is called al-Ashram (Ibn
Qutayba, 276–7; see also al-Ya‘qūbī, 1:199–200; al-Maṣ‘ūdī, Muṣṭāfah al-Dhahabī, 2:77–8).

A yet earlier Abraha is mentioned among the first generations of the kings of Ḫimyar, the descendants of Qāḥṭān. The king called Abraha b. al-Ra‘īsh, with the nickname Dhū l-Manār (e.g., Ibn Qutayba, 272; Ibn Ḥabīb, 364) is said to have been named for the biblical Abraham (Ibn Ḥishām, Tijān, 136; de Prémare, 310).

The sources usually treat the Abraha of the Expedition of the Elephant and Abū Yakṣūm as one and the same person. His career as related in the Islamic sources (discussed in detail in de Prémare, 296–301) began when Abyssinian forces raided Yemen from the sea and gained control over the kingdom of Ḫimyar. The raid was designed primarily to end the persecution of Christians in South Arabia. The Abyssinian commander was Arīṭ, though in Ibn Bukayr’s version he is given the (Persian?) name “Rūzabah,” and Abraha accompanied him (Ibn Bukayr, 59; for Ibn Bukayr’s version, see also de Prémare, 327–33). Other versions maintain that the commander was Abraha and that Arīṭ was sent later to ensure Abraha’s loyalty to the Negus (the king of Abyssinia). Eventually Abraha killed Arīṭ (Rūzabah) and established himself as king of Yemen. He also obtained the support of the Negus, who at first intended to revenge Arīṭ’s blood.

In some reports on the history of Mecca and its Quraysh tribe in pre-Islamic times, Abraha (or rather Abū Yakṣūm) emerges as a prominent ruler. Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/819) mentions one of the Quraysh, al-Ḥārith b. ʿAlqama, who was a hostage (raḥīna) of the Quraysh handed over to Abū Yakṣūm the Abyssinian (Ibn al-Kalbī, Jamharat al-ṇasab, 67). The Quraysh surrendered him to Abū Yakṣūm, who agreed in return not to sever the commercial relations between his kingdom and Mecca. The need for the surrender of hostages arose after some merchants from Abū Yakṣūm’s country had been robbed in Mecca (al-Baladhūrī, 9:4026; Kister, 429–30). Another hostage with Abū Yakṣūm, ʿUṭbān b. Ṭalik of the Thaqīf tribe, was from al-Ṭaʿīf, east-southeast of Mecca (al-Baladhūrī, 13:5716; Kister, 430–1).

Abraha is said to have reigned as king in Yemen for twenty or twenty-three years and to have been succeeded by his son Yakṣūm and then by another son, Masrṭq. The latter was the last Abyssinian king of Yemen before the Persians took control (Abū l-Faraj al-Ṯaʿālīfī, 16:73, 75; al-Maṣ‘ūdī, Kitāb al-tanbih, 260).

The sources provide some details about Abraha’s offspring. Rayhānī, “daughter of al-ʿAshram al-Ḥabashī [the Abyssinian],” is said to have given birth to Abraha b. al-Ṣabbāḥ, “king of Tīḥāmā [along the Red Sea coast].” His brother was Khayr b. al-Ṣabbāḥ (Ibn al-Kalbī, Jamharat al-ṇasab, 2:542; cf. Ibn Ḥazm, 435). Another daughter of Abraha, sister of Masrṭq, was Basbāṣa (al-Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1:933; ed. İbrāhīm, 2:130). A nephew of al-ʿAshram, named Yakṣūm, is said to have given the Prophet some kind of weapon as a gift (Ibn Manẓūr, s.v. qur-t-r).

Abraha is known in the Islamic sources mainly for his abortive attack on the Kaʿba at Mecca. The sources give the following reasons for his campaign against Mecca (surveyed in detail by de Prémare, 311f.): Abraha erected in Ṣanʿa’a a monumental church—called in Arabic al-Qullays (or al-Qulays)—using materials extracted from ancient temples in Maʿrib. He dedicated it to the Negus, with the intention of making it a pilgrimage center for all Arabs, in place of the Kaʿba in Mecca. Some versions assert that his building was designed as a
Ka’ba on its own (Ibn Bukayr, 60; Ibn al-Kalbī, Asmūn, 46–7). According to Yaqút, Abraha’s monument was known as al-ka’ba t-yamānīyya, and an idol named al-Khalasa was placed inside it (Yaqút, 2:383). People of North Arabian tribes of the Kināna, of the nasa’a—who charged with the duty of deciding on intercalation (nāsī) —were determined to prevent the decline of Mecca as a pilgrimage center and desecrated the church. In response, Abraha decided to attack Mecca with an elephant and destroy the Ka’ba. The elephant is said to have been supplied by the Negus. Abraha’s army reportedly consisted of forces from South Arabian tribes, that is Akk, al-Ash’ar, and Khath’am (Ibn Bukayr, 61).

In other versions, the theme of building a substitute for the Ka’ba is absent, and the reason for Abraha’s attack on the Ka’ba was merely retaliation for the looting by Meccan Arabs of a church in Najrān, in South Arabia (Ibn Abī Ḥattīm, 10:3464).

On his way north, Abraha is said to have passed through the settlements of various tribes from which he took prisoners, who were forced to act as his guides. Abraha’s army is said eventually to have passed through al-Tā’if, and the local people of the tribe of Thaqif informed him that the temple he sought was in Mecca. They sent a guide with him, named Abū Righāl. When they reached al-Mughammas, a short distance from Mecca, Abū Righāl died and was buried there (for al-Mughammas, see de Prémare, 334–5). The Arabs have made it a practice to stone his grave ever since. In that place, the elephant knelt down and refused to proceed, and God destroyed the army.

A peculiar version is recorded in the Ṭafsīr of Muqṭā’il b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), who speaks of two campaigns against Mecca that involved an elephant. The first was initiated by the Yemeni Abraha b. al-Ashram; he dispatched his son Abū Yaksūm—who is called al-Yamānī al-Ḥabashi (“the Abyssinian Yemeni”)—with an army and an elephant, in order to make the elephant an idol in place of the Ka’ba, which they planned to destroy. The elephant refused to advance on the Ka’ba, and the army eventually retreated. The second attack was attempted a year or two later. Some Quraysh traders went to Abyssinia and camped in a Christian church not far from the beach. They roasted meat and left the fire burning, and the church went up in flames. The Negus was enraged and set out with his army and elephant toward Mecca. He was accompanied by “kings” of Kinda (an originally South Arabian tribal group), among them Abū Yaksūm al-Kindī and Abraha b. al-Ṣabbāḥ al-Kindī. The defeat of the army came when birds attacked it, pelting it with stones (Muqṭā’il b. Sulaymān, 4:847–54; see also de Prémare, 311–25). The sources name ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Muhammad’s grandfather, as the leader of the Quraysh, who bravely stood up to Abraha and never lost his faith in God’s help against the invading troops.

The memory of the campaign against Mecca was preserved in the term “The Year of the Elephant” (usually dated to 570 C.E.), which became the starting point for the chronology of the remaining pre-Islamic history of Mecca, as Muhammad’s hijra marks the beginning of the Islamic era. Some traditions say that Muhammad’s birth, which is usually given as 570 C.E., coincided with the Year of the Elephant, while others hold that he was born 23 or 40 years after the Year of the Elephant, which would put the Year of the Elephant at sometime between about 530 and 547 C.E. (Rubin, 199f.).
Survivors of the “People of the Elephant” are said to have been sixty members of the tribe of Ḥarb b. Ḥumays b. Udd. It is claimed that the number of their descendants remained fixed at sixty down through the ages (al-Baladhurt, 11:4935).

The earliest known Islamic allusion to Abraha’s campaign against Mecca is in the Sūrat al-Fīl (Qurʾān 105), which alludes to a divine disaster inflicted on the “People of the Elephant.” God frustrated their evil plot and sent flocks of birds to pelt them with stones, and they became like “straw eaten up.” Muslim exegetes are unanimous that the “People of the Elephant” are Abraha’s troops who attacked the Ka’ba.

Earlier references seem to have been preserved in pre-Islamic poetry, mainly in some qaṣīdas, which, according to al-Jāḥiz (d. 255/869), are of undisputed Jāḥili (pre-Islamic) origin (al-Jāḥiz, Kībūb al-hayāwān, 7:196–8). One of the qaṣīdas is by Abū Qays Ṣayfī b. al-Aslat (Ibn Hīšām, al-Sūra al-nabawīya, 1:60). The poet praises God for his succor “on the day of the elephant of the Abyssinians” (yawma fī l-ḥubūshi). The poet says that whenever the Abyssinians urged the elephant forward it held its ground, even though they drove their hooks into its flanks and split its nose (ṣarrāmānū anfāhū), using a knife as a whip. Instead, it turned and faced the way it had come. Then God sent a wind bringing a shower of pebbles (ḥāṣīb) from above. Their priests (aḥbārūhum) urged them to endure, but they bleated like sheep. In other verses by the same poet (al-Jāḥiz, Kībūb al-hayāwān, 7:197), an “ingenious test” (balāʿīn muṣadāqūn) is mentioned, which God gave the Quraysh on “the morning of Abū Yaksūm, the leader of the squadrons.” God’s armies caused them to retreat, pelting them and covering them with dust. They hastened to withdraw with regret, but only a few of them reached their homes. Al-Jāḥiz quotes a verse of the Jāḥili poet Tufayl al-Ghanawī, which mentions a certain place near Mecca in which “the elephant disobeyed his masters” (al-Jāḥiz, Kībūb al-hayāwān, 7:197).

These and other verses that al-Jāḥiz considers genuinely pre-Islamic (al-Jāḥiz, Kībūb al-hayāwān, 7:197–9) are indeed free of Qurʾānic vocabulary and style—even the description of the divine punishment lacks Qurʾānic phrases—and seem to preserve a pre-Islamic myth of Abū Yaksūm and the elephant that refused to march on the Ka’ba and of the divine punishment inflicted on the army. The Qurʾān has turned the theme into a typical “punishment story,” like those concerning ʿĀd and Thamūd, which are also based on local Arabian lore. The opening words of the Sūrat al-Fīl (i.e., a-lam tara kayfa faʿala rabbuka) recur in a passage about ʿĀd (Q. 89:6). This link between the two passages was already noticed by al-Jāḥiz (Kībūb al-hayāwān, 7:200).

Tradition has turned the divine punishment into the cause of Abraha’s death. According to Ibn Isḥāq, Abraha was smitten in his body, and on his retreat from Mecca, his fingers fell off one by one. When he died in Ṣanʿa’ his heart burst from his body. Some versions assert that only Abraha was smitten in his body, not the other South Arabian soldiers, who at one point refused to attack the Ka’ba, recognising its sacred character (Ibn Bukayr, 63–4). Other reports say that Abraha did not reach Yemen and died near Mecca, in a place called Dhāt ’Ushsh (al-Bakrī, 2:944).

The sources see in the defeat of Abraha on the outskirts of Mecca a sign of divine protection bestowed on Mecca and the Quraysh. Ibn Isḥāq relates that this event led the Arabs to admire the Quraysh as
a sacred community, and he calls them “people of God” (ahl Allāh) (Ibn Hishām, Sīra, 1:59).

In Islamic times, however, Abraha became a source of pride for black Muslims who saw in this king a mighty hero who succeeded in humiliating the Quraysh. This comes out in an epistle (risāla) by al-Jāhiz showing blacks (al-sūdān) boasting of their superiority over whites (al-bīdān). Some verses are adduced here that say that the Quraysh for all their might could not prevent Abū Yaksūm from raiding their land, and it was God alone who could protect them (al-Jāhiz, al-Rasā’il, 1:182–6). Another verse describes Abraha as “the greatest king,” and another one praises Abū Yaksūm as surpassing any immortal creature, if ever there was one (al-Jāhiz, al-Rasā’il, 1:197–8).

As for the evidence of non-Islamic sources (Beeston; Robin; de Prémare, 289–95), the Byzantine historian Procopius writes in the sixth-century C.E. that Hellestheaios, king of Abyssinia, invaded South Arabia a few years before 531 C.E., killed its king, appointed a puppet ruler named Esimiphaios, and returned to Abyssinia; subsequently, Abyssinian deserters who had remained in South Arabia revolted against Esimiphaios and set on the throne Abraha, originally the slave of a Byzantine merchant of Adulis; two expeditions sent by Hellestheaios against the rebels were unsuccessful, and Abraha retained the throne; Justinian’s attempts to incite Abraha to attack Persia were in vain, for he merely marched a short distance north and then retreated; so long as Hellestheaios was alive, Abraha refused to pay tribute to Abyssinia but agreed to do so to Hellestheaios’s successor.

A long inscription of Abraha found on the Ma‘rib dam records the quelling of an insurrection supported by a son of the dethroned Esimiphaios in the year 657 of the Sabaean era (640–50 C.E.); repairs effected to the dam later in the same year; the reception of embassies from Abyssinia, Byzantium, Persia, al-Hira, and Hārith b. Jabalat, the phylarch of Arabia; and the completion of repairs to the dam in 658.

Another inscription was discovered in South Arabia in 1951, the Murayghān inscription (Ryckmans, no. 506), describing Abraha’s military campaign in central Arabia against the Arab tribes of Ma‘add and mentioning a victory over a tribal confederation of the ’Amir b. Ṣaṣa‘a. The inscription is dated 662 of the Sabaean era (the late forties or early fifties of the sixth century C.E.); it cannot be later than 554 C.E., because it mentions al-Mundhir—who was assassinated that year—as king of al-Hira.

Neither the Ka‘ba nor Mecca is mentioned in the inscription, highlighting the gap between the Abraha of the inscription and the Islamic Abraha of the Elephant. While the former is triumphant, the latter is a wretched victim of God’s wrath.

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Uri Rubin

Abū Ḥaṣṣ ‘Umar al-Hintāṭī

Abū Ḥaṣṣ ‘Umar b. Yahyā al-Hintāṭī (c. 482–571/1090–1175 or 1176) was a chief architect of the Almohad (al-Muwaḥḥidūn) empire and a close companion of the Mahdī of the Almohads, Ibn Tūmart, and his successors. His original Berber name was Fāskātū ʿ- Mzāl ʿIntī. Ibn Tūmart changed his name to Abū Ḥaṣṣ, the name borne by one of the Companions of the prophet Muhammad. Abū Ḥaṣṣ had established his family as one that was consistently loyal to the original Almohad unitarian doctrine (*taḥṣūd*) of Ibn Tūmart. Abū Ḥaṣṣ’s grandson Abū Zakariyyāʾ Yahyā b. ‘Abd al-Wahīd broke away from Ibn Tūmart’s Mu’mimid successors, who had altered elements of the original Almohad doctrine, and founded the Ḥaṣīd dynasty (r. 627–982/1229–1574), in the region of modern-day Tunisia.

Abū Ḥaṣṣ was chief of the powerful Hintāṭī tribe of the Anti-Atlas, whose warriors he commanded in battle against the ruling Almoravids (al-Murābītun). Realising the need to unify the tribes of the Atlas, Ibn Tūmart trusted Abū Ḥaṣṣ’s loyalty and elevated his tribe to pre-eminence in the Almohad hierarchy, which consisted of tribes, scholars, and councils, which were