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Mapping and synthesizing ancient Arabia: The Maparabia project (2019-23)

Jérémie Schiettecatte, Irene Rossi

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THE IASA BULLETIN



The Latest News and Research in the Arabian Peninsula



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Mapping and synthesizing ancient Arabia: The Maparabia project (2019-23)

Jérémie Schiettecatte (CNRS, UMR 8167 Orient et Méditerranée, Paris)

Irene Rossi (CNR, Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale, Milan)

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Whoever has had the opportunity to consult maps of the ancient Near East has noticed the absence of most of the Arabian Peninsula, showing at best its northern fringe or the shore of the Persian Gulf. The region is often pushed into the background, relegated to purported desert emptiness. Yet, 50 years of intensive research into the pre-Islamic history of the Peninsula have shown otherwise. And the last decade was an incredible booster in this research area, fostered by the production of corpuses, the investigation of new territories, such as Saudi Arabia, and its share of breakthroughs. This discrepancy is as much a consequence of the scarcity of syntheses intended for non-specialists as of the nature of the pre-Islamic Arabian epigraphy, accessible only to a small number of specialists.

In other words, there is a considerable amount of data available that addresses topical issues — such as the human-environment relationship; the emergence of an Arab identity and the birth of Islam; the place of Arabia in a connected Old World system, etc., and it is now possible to take advantage of the existing corpuses to develop the tools for their analysis, to produce syntheses, and to make them accessible to the greatest number of people. This is the purpose of the Maparabia project.

Fig 1. Screenshot of the online digital atlas interface (Maparabia project/CNRS/CNR/Cartodia).



It is a 5-year project funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR-18-CE27-0015, PI J. Schiettecatte), 2019-23, which encompasses a variety of fields of research: history, archaeology, epigraphy, linguistics, palaeography, geomatics, and geography. The fifteen members of the project come from four laboratories dedicated to pre-Islamic Arabia: CNRS-Orient & Méditerranée (Paris), CNRS-Archéorient (Lyon), Dipartimento di Civiltà e Forme del Sapere of the University of Pisa, and CNR-ISPC (Milan).

Based on archaeological data and large epigraphic corpuses (DASI, OCIANA), the project aims to develop three free online research instruments, adhering to Open Science and FAIR principles.

1/ Digital atlas of ancient Arabia: This online platform is designed for the mapping of monuments, inscriptions, languages, scripts, cults and social groups (FIG. 1). It exposes a geolocated database (postgreSQL) of two types of entities: archaeological sites and inscriptions. The archaeological data is compiled from the existing bibliography; the epigraphic data is imported from the DASI corpus (about 7200 South Arabian inscriptions at the moment) and OCIANA (about 3500 North Arabian inscriptions). The platform includes full web-GIS functionality: a map displayed in a browser, with a dynamic legend and timeline to display/hide/filter layers and data; simple queries are possible according to specific attributes (scripts, languages, type of remains, etc.). In addition, the encoding of the epigraphic content of ancient Arabian inscriptions (names of deities and tribes) allows the mapping of the distribution of cults and social groups. Any specialist wishing to carry out advanced queries or spatial analyses may request access to the QGIS project and use the database on open-source GIS software for his/her own research.

2/ Gazetteer of ancient Arabia: This consists of a list of places, providing their identification, description, and semantic relationships between them (FIG. 2). It adopts the definition of “Place” disseminated by the Pleiades project (<https://pleiades.stoa.org/help/concepts>), therefore elements of the natural and anthropic landscape, settlements and individual artifacts, political, social and cultural entities related to the territory are taken into consideration “whether or not exactly locatable, whether or not their actual relation with the real world can be ascertained”. The Gazetteer is populated automatically by importing data from DASI on demand, in particular: onomastic items (toponyms, tribe names, building names); corresponding epigraphic sigla; data on archaeological sites; and some vocabularies, especially those related to periodization. Synchronization with DASI does not preclude from manually entering new Name, Source and Period records, nor the implementation of existing records with new metadata, in order to provide a complete description of a Place based on other sources (e.g. North Arabian and Nabataean inscriptions).

3/ Thematic Dictionary of Ancient Arabia (TDAA):

This is a comprehensive electronic dictionary covering several aspects of the history, society, religion, linguistics

and topography of Arabia from the beginning of the first millennium BCE to the seventh century CE. The treatment of its entries is based primarily on the consideration of epigraphic and archaeological material, which in turn allows for an assessment of the reliability and historicity of other sources, often considered distorted by distance (classical sources) or remoteness (Arab-Islamic sources). In this respect, the TDAA is intended to meet the need for an up-to-date open-access synthesis. The TDAA will benefit both specialists of ancient Arabia, and the wider academic community, by facilitating access to sources essential for the understanding of the ancient world and the emergence of Islam. To date, more than 700 entries are planned and 90 contributors from different academic backgrounds are involved in their writing.

We plan to make these instruments publicly available in the course of 2022 (<https://ancientarabia.huma-num.fr>), and hope that this project will promote the production of a renewed regional history from the beginning of the first millennium BCE to the seventh century CE. We do not exclude extending the chronological range to the protohistoric and prehistoric periods in the future. One day at a time...

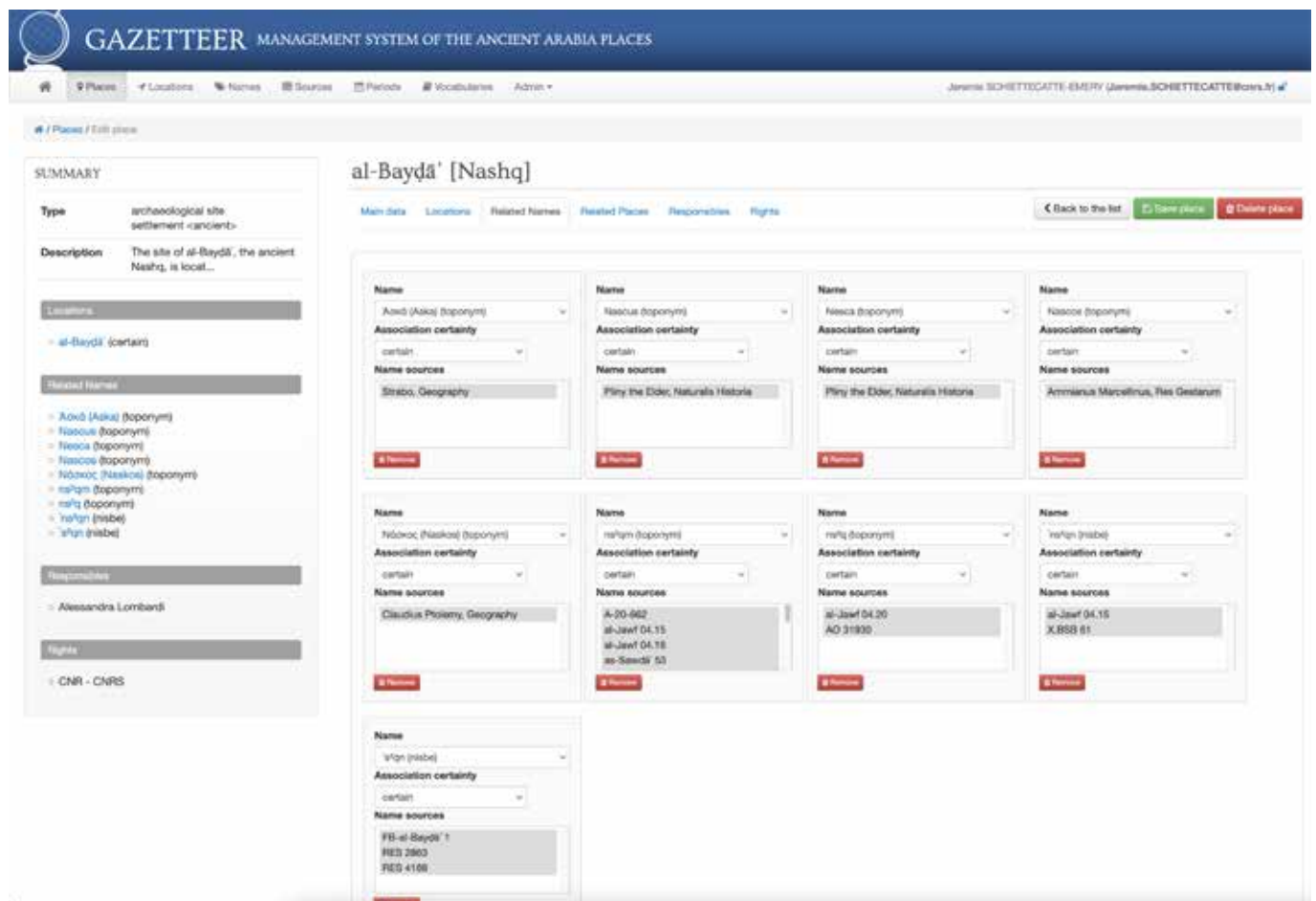


Figure 2. Screenshot of the Gazetteer management system (Maparabia project/CNR/CNRS).