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## The Place—or the Tribe—Called Nahom?: NHM as Both a Tribal and Geographic Name in Modern and Ancient Yemen

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**Abstract:** Nihm has been the name of both a tribe and an administrative district in the Sana'a governate since the formation of the Republic of Yemen in 1990, but some believe “it is doubtful that this later use of tribal names to refer to geographical entities can be retrojected onto much earlier periods.” Such skepticism is based, at least in part, on the belief that “careful examination of South Arabian inscriptions indicates that the names of tribes were essentially social-political in orientation,” and therefore carried no geographic meaning.

This paper aims to address this issue by (1) reviewing the historical use of the name Nihm for both a tribe and place, documented back to the early Islamic period; (2) examining the historical relationship between tribes and their territories in northern Yemen, going back to antiquity; (3) assessing the use of nhmyn in the ancient inscriptions, as interpreted by scholars of ancient South Arabia. As will be shown, the use of Nihm as a toponym (the name of a place or region) does indeed go back to significantly earlier times, and general use of tribal names as toponyms in Yemen goes back earlier still. This is a natural consequence of the strong connection between tribe and territory in northern Yemen that has existed since pre-Islamic times. When understood in this context, the inscriptions referring to nhmyn can reasonably be understood as evidence for both a tribe and place called NHM going back to the early first millennium BC.



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# The Place—or the Tribe—Called Nahom?

## NHM as Both a Tribal and Geographic Name in Modern and Ancient Yemen

Neal Rappleye

For decades, Latter-day Saint scholars have argued that “the place . . . called Nahom” in the Book of Mormon (1 Ne. 16:34) is the Nihm region<sup>1</sup> in Yemen, located northeast of Sana’a, west of Ma’rib, and south of the Wadi Jawf.<sup>2</sup> The location fits well both with the directions provided for getting to and from Nahom in the Book of Mormon (1 Ne. 16:13–14, 33; 17:1) and with inscriptions dated to Lehi’s time referring to a person called a *nhmyn*, translated as “Nihmite,” confirming that the name goes back to the right time period.<sup>3</sup> Publications by Princeton,

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1. Nihm is also variously spelled *Nahm*, *Naham*, *Nehhm*, *Nehem*, and so on.

2. The first person to propose this connection was Ross T. Christensen in his October 8, 1977, presentation at the twenty-sixth annual symposium of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology (SEHA) at BYU. See Ruth R. Christensen, “Twenty-Sixth Annual Symposium Held,” *Newsletter and Proceedings of the SEHA* 141 (December 1977): 9; Ross T. Christensen, “The Place Called Nahom,” *Ensign* 8, no. 8 (August 1978): 73. See also “Some Possible Identifications of Book of Mormon Sites,” *Newsletter and Proceedings of the SEHA* 149 (June 1982): 11.

3. For a summary of the Latter-day Saint literature about these inscriptions, see Warren P. Aston, “A History of NaHoM,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012): 78–98. Key publications include S. Kent Brown, “‘The Place That Was Called Nahom’: New Light from Ancient Yemen,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 66–68; Warren P. Aston, “Newly Found Altars from Nahom,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 56–61, 71; “Book of Mormon Linked to Site in Yemen,” *Ensign* 31, no. 2 (February 2001): 79; S. Kent Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 81–83; Stephen D. Ricks, “On Lehi’s Trial: Nahom, Ishmael’s Burial Place,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 1 (2011): 66–68; Brant A.

Oxford, and Brill have talked about the connection,<sup>4</sup> with some hailing the inscriptions as “the first actual archaeological evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, however, skeptics of the Book of Mormon’s historicity have raised objections to this connection.<sup>6</sup> One common argument insists that the South Arabian inscriptions referring to *nhmyn* are identifying members of a *tribe* and thus cannot be used as evidence for a *place* called Nahom. One writer, for instance, maintains that in the Book of Mormon, “Nahom is inaccurately portrayed as a place rather than a tribal people,” and claims that “within an ancient south Arabian context, it does not make sense to speak of Nihm as though it were a regular place name.”<sup>7</sup>

Nihm has been the name of both a tribe and an administrative district in the Sana’a governate since the formation of the Republic of Yemen in 1990 (see fig. 1),<sup>8</sup> but some believe “it is doubtful that this later use of tribal names to refer to geographical entities can be retrojected

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Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 105–108; Warren P. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia: The Old World Setting of the Book of Mormon* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris, 2015), 79–85.

4. See John M. Lundquist, “Biblical Seafaring and the Book of Mormon,” in Raphael Patai, *The Children of Noah: Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 173; Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 120–21, 147; Terryl L. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 117–18; John A. Tvedtnes, “Names of People: Book of Mormon,” in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, 4 vols., ed. Geoffrey Khan (Boston: E. J. Brill, 2013), 2:787; Grant Hardy, “The Book of Mormon,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 143.

5. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 120.

6. For a response to previous criticisms, see Neal Rappleye and Stephen O. Smoot, “Book of Mormon Minimalists and the NHM Inscriptions: A Response to Dan Vogel,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 157–85.

7. RT, “Nahom and Lehi’s Journey through Arabia: A Historical Perspective, Part 2,” Faith-Promoting Rumor (blog), October 6, 2015, accessed May 25, 2023, <https://faithpromotingrumor.com/2015/10/06/nahom-and-lehis-journey-through-arabia-a-historical-perspective-part-2/>.

8. Unfortunately, as part of Yemen’s ongoing civil war, the Nihm region has been ground zero for several conflicts within recent years. See “Nihm Offensive,” Wikipedia, accessed May 25, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nihm\\_Offensive](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nihm_Offensive). Although the last reported conflict involving the Nihm was in January 2020, as of this writing the larger conflict remains unresolved, so it is hard to say if there will be any long-term impacts on political and tribal boundaries.



FIGURE 1. The boundaries of the Nihm district, ca. 2015. Map data: Google, © 2021 Terrametrics.

onto much earlier periods.”<sup>9</sup> Such skepticism is based, at least in part, on the belief that “careful examination of South Arabian inscriptions indicates that the names of tribes were essentially social-political in orientation,” and therefore carried no geographic meaning.<sup>10</sup>

This paper aims to address this issue by (1) reviewing the historical use of the name *Nihm* for both a tribe and place, documented back to the early Islamic period; (2) examining the historical relationship between tribes and their territories in northern Yemen, going back to antiquity; (3) assessing the use of *nhmyn* in the ancient inscriptions, as interpreted by scholars of ancient South Arabia. As will be shown, the use of *Nihm* as a toponym (the name of a place or region) does indeed go back to significantly earlier times, and general use of tribal names as toponyms in Yemen goes back earlier still. This is a natural consequence of the strong connection between tribe and territory in northern Yemen that has existed since pre-Islamic times. When understood in this context, the inscriptions referring to *nhmyn* can reasonably be understood as evidence for both a tribe and place called NHM going back to the early first millennium BC.

### **Nihm: A Tribe and a Place**

The use of Nihm as a geographic name predates its relatively recent adoption as the name of an official administrative district in the northeast corner of the Sana‘a governate (see fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> As Warren Aston notes, shortly before the Yemen Arab Republic and South Yemen united to become the Republic of

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9. RT, “Nahom and Lehi’s Journey through Arabia.”

10. RT, “Nahom and Lehi’s Journey through Arabia.” For a previous response to this argument, see Jeff Lindsay, “Nahom/NHM: Only a Tribe, Not a Place?,” *Arise from the Dust* (blog), August 5, 2022, accessed May 25, 2023, <https://www.arisefromthedust.com/nahom-nhm-only-a-tribe-not-a-place/>.

11. This is unsurprising, since many of the administrative districts in northern Yemen are named after established tribes whose names have long been associated with the regions they occupy. For several examples, see the discussion of various tribes in Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthis Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24–34, many of which have an eponymous district whose borders are roughly equivalent to the tribal territory. In a few instances, however, Brandt notes cases where a tribe’s territory is more expansive than the administrative district by the same name (for example, the Rāziḥ tribal territory expands beyond the Rāziḥ district into the neighboring Shidā’ district, pp. 27–28). Compare Marieke Brandt, “The Concept of Tribe in the Anthropology of Yemen,” in *Tribes in Modern Yemen: An Anthology*, ed. Marieke Brandt (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2021), 12: “In the 20th century, these tribal territories became the basis of the administrative divisions of northern Yemen; the borders of most of today’s districts (sg. *mudiriyyah*) and

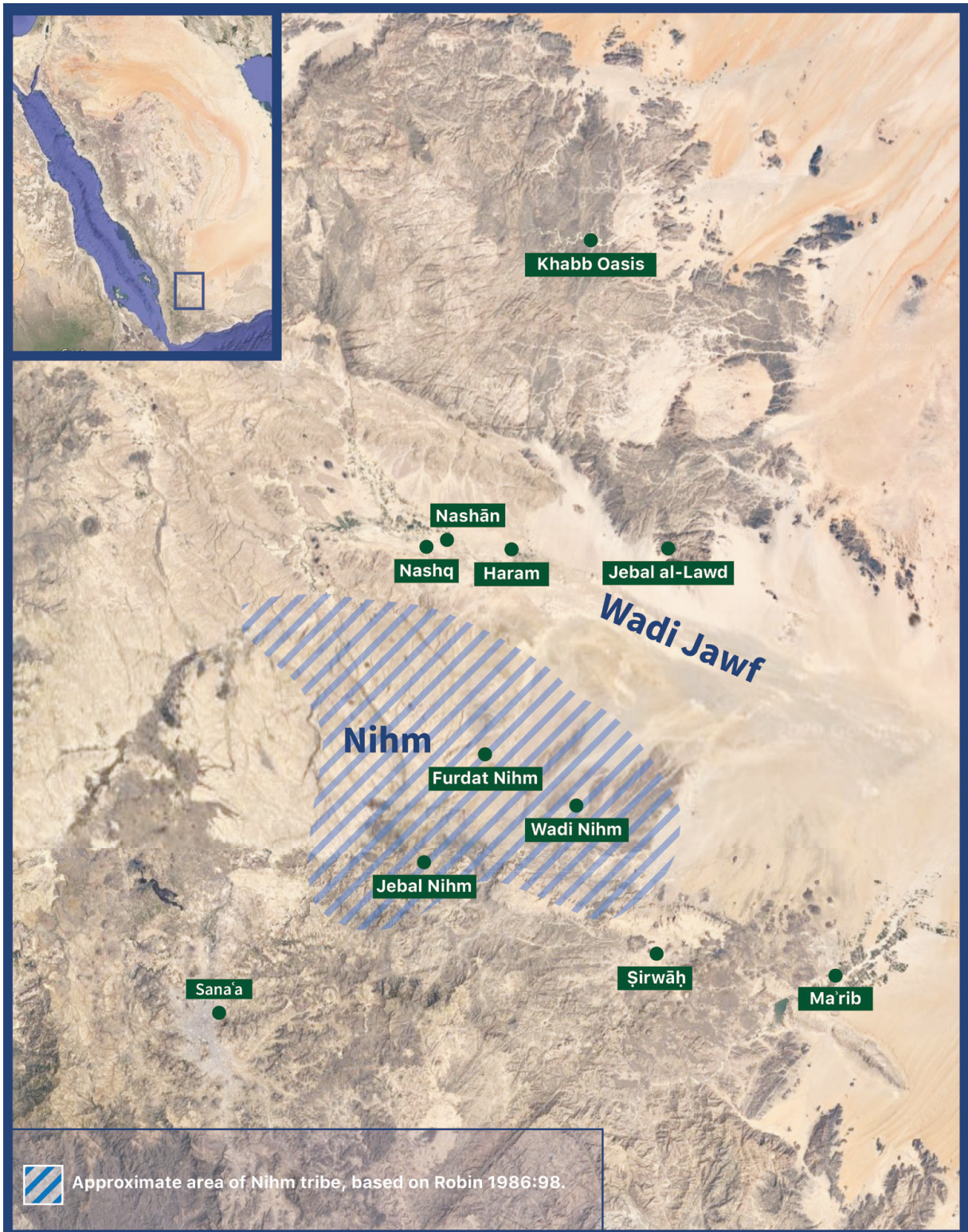


FIGURE 2. The Nihm tribal territory, ca. 1986. Map data: Google, © 2021 Terrametrics.

Yemen, “Nehem [was] a fairly large and somewhat loosely defined district.”<sup>12</sup> According to Hiroshi Matsumoto, at this time the Nihm was considered a *nāḥiyah*, “district,” a third-order administrative level in the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). In the YAR’s administrative structure, “the *nāḥiyah* level correspond[ed] to the tribe.”<sup>13</sup> In 1986, Christian Robin reconstructed the boundaries of this “loosely defined district” or tribal territory, sketching out a five-thousand-square-kilometer region that differed in some ways from what later became the Nihm district as it is constituted in the Republic of Yemen (see fig. 2).<sup>14</sup>

Various sources that predate the establishment of the official Nihm administrative district make formal and informal reference to this region as *Nihm* (or one of its variant spellings). For example, in 1947, when Egyptian archaeologist Ahmed Fakhry traveled through what was then called the Kingdom of Yemen, he mentioned passing through “the land of the bedouins of Nahm” just south of the Wadi Jawf.<sup>15</sup> In 1936, British explorer Harry St. John Philby also visited the region and later spoke of a “tribal area . . . known as Bilad [Ar., *country, land*] Nahm.”<sup>16</sup> Nihm (or one of its variant spellings) is also plotted on several mid-twentieth-century maps predating the rise of the Republic of Yemen.<sup>17</sup>

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municipalities (sg. *‘uzlah*) are congruent with the boundaries of the tribes and tribal sections that inhabit them.”

12. Warren P. Aston and Michaela J. Aston, “The Search for Nahom and the End of Lehi’s Trail in Southern Arabia,” FARMS Paper (1989), 6.

13. Matsumoto specifically notes that the Nihm *nāḥiyah* “consist[ed] of only one tribe” and “the territorial names of the regional division . . . [within the Nihm *nāḥiyah*] correspond to the names of tribal sections completely.” Hiroshi Matsumoto, “The History of ‘Uzlah and Mikhlāf in North Yemen,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 24 (1994): 176.

14. Christian Robin, “Nihm: Nubdha fī ‘l-jughrāfiyya al-ta’rīkhiyya waḥdān li-mu‘ṭiyāt al-Hamdānī,” in *Al-Hamdānī: A Great Yemeni Scholar, Studies on the Occasion of His Millennial Anniversary*, ed. Yusuf Mohammad Abdallah (Sana‘a, Yemen: Sana‘a University, 1986), 84–87, 98 (map).

15. Ahmed Fakhry, *An Archaeological Journey to Yemen (March–May 1947)*, 3 vols. (Cairo: Government Press, 1952), 1:13. This is while he is traveling in Wadi Hirran, south of the Jawf (*El Gōf*; see figure 1 on 1:3). See also 1:22, where he talks about Joseph Halévy’s travels in “the land of the tribe of Nihm.”

16. Harry St. John Philby, *Sheba’s Daughters: Being a Record of Travel in Southern Arabia* (London: Methuen and Co., 1939), 381. Later he refers to the region as “the country of the Nahm tribe” (398).

17. Warren P. Aston, “The Origins of the Nihm Tribe of Yemen: A Window into Arabia’s Past,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 4, no. 1 (2014): 141, documents Nihm on official government maps from 1961, 1962, 1968, 1976, 1978, and 1985. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah*

Sources from before the twentieth century paint a similar picture to the present-day situation, using the name *Nihm* (or one of its variant spellings) as both a tribal and geographic name. For instance, Ḥayyim Ḥabshūsh, a Yemeni Jew who acted as a travel guide to Joseph Halévy when Halévy explored southern Arabia in 1869–1870, provides accounts of traveling through the “the land of Nihm” among “Nihmī tribesmen.”<sup>18</sup> A map based on his account shows the “Land of Nihm” roughly thirty miles northeast of Sana’a.<sup>19</sup> Halévy’s own account also refers to Nihm variously as “the inhabited country of Nehm” (*pays habité de Nehm*), “the canton of Nehm” (*canton de Nehm*), and “the territory of Nehm” (*territoire de Nehm*). Halévy also mentions the Nehm among the tribes of Bakīl and includes *Nehm* on the map published with his report.<sup>20</sup>

Earlier still are the various maps from the mid-eighteenth to the early-nineteenth centuries plotting the Nihm region, usually spelled *Nehem* or *Nehhm*.<sup>21</sup> These maps generally do not provide precise borders, but they consistently show *Nehem* or *Nehhm* to the north or northeast of Sana’a, in the same general area as the Nihm region today. The use of the Nihm name on these maps is *prima facie* evidence of its use as a geographic name more than 250 years ago. Most of these maps are based either on Jean Baptiste D’Anville’s 1751 map of Asia (including Arabia) or on Carsten Niebuhr’s 1771 map of Yemen.<sup>22</sup>

Niebuhr was the only survivor of the first European expedition to southern Arabia, which lasted from 1761 to 1767, and thus his map of Yemen was based on the firsthand knowledge he gained of the land.<sup>23</sup>

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*in Arabia*, 75–76, supplements those references with additional maps from 1939, 1945, and 1974.

18. See Alan Verskin, trans., *A Vision of Yemen: The Travels of a European Orientalist and His Native Guide, a Translation of Ḥayyim Ḥabshūsh’s Travelogue* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2018), 87–88, 96–105, 114–121, 238 n. 39. In the Hebrew version of Ḥabshūsh’s account, “land of Nihm” appears as ארץ נהם (*eretz NHM*). See, for example, Ḥayyim Ḥabshūsh, *Ru’yal al-Yaman (Mas’ot Ḥabshūsh)*, ed. S. D. Goitein (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1983), 33.

19. See “Map of locations mentioned in Ḥayyim Ḥabshūsh’s *Vision of Yemen*,” in Verskin, *Vision of Yemen*, [xvii].

20. See *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* 6, no. 6 (1873): 16, 36, 112–13 (map), 260–61, 270. Halévy’s map is conveniently reprinted in Verskin, *Vision of Yemen*, [xvi].

21. See Aston, “Origins of the Nihm Tribe,” 139–41; Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 75. See also James Gee, “The Nahom Maps,” *Journal of Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture* 17, no. 1 (2008): 40–57.

22. See Gee, “Nahom Maps,” 42.

23. See Thorkild Hansen, *Arabia Felix: The Danish Expedition of 1761–1767*, trans. James McFarlane and Kathleen McFarlane (New York: New York Review Books, 1964). For



He showed *Nehhm* to the north-northeast of Sana'a. Unlike most other mapmakers, Niebuhr provided an outline of *Nehhm's* borders, which encompassed approximately 2,394 square miles.<sup>24</sup> If this is accurate, it means that at that time the Nihm region was slightly larger than the present-day tribal territory as estimated by Robin.<sup>25</sup> In his writings, Niebuhr characterizes *Nehhm* as a "principality" or "small district" and listed it as one of the "independent states of Yemen."<sup>26</sup> He never uses the *Nehhm* name to refer to a tribe. Thus, the earliest references to Nihm from modern times frame it primarily as a geographic term rather than a tribal name.

D'Anville's map is the earliest known modern map of Arabia that includes *Nehem* as the name of a region nearly due north of Sana'a.<sup>27</sup> Since D'Anville already knew about Nihm and included it on his 1751 map *before* Niebuhr's expedition, he must have gleaned that information from an earlier source. The specific source has not presently been identified, but D'Anville is known to have drawn from Arab sources from the twelfth to seventeenth centuries. D'Anville's map thus hints that Nihm was known as a geographic region in sources much earlier than 1751.<sup>28</sup>

Warren Aston has identified references to the Nihm in Arabic sources from the seventh to thirteenth centuries.<sup>29</sup> Among these, Abu Muhammad al-Hasan al-Hamdānī (ca. AD 893–945) was the most prolific and detailed. Historians of Yemen have long drawn on Hamdānī's writings to reconstruct the tribal geography of early Islamic times and assess the continuity and stability of Yemen's tribal structure over the centuries.<sup>30</sup> Based on analysis of Hamdānī's writings, Christian Robin found that in the tenth century AD, the Nihm controlled both the core regions of their traditional tribal lands on the south side of the Wadi Jawf and territory

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Niebuhr's own account of his travels, see Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia, and Other Countries in the East*, 2 vols., trans. Robert Heron (Edinburgh: R. Morrison and Son, 1792–99).

24. See Gee, "Nahom Maps," 42–43.

25. As mentioned above, Robin estimated that the Nihm tribal lands covered 5,000 square kilometers, which converts to about 1,931 square miles. Robin, "Nihm."

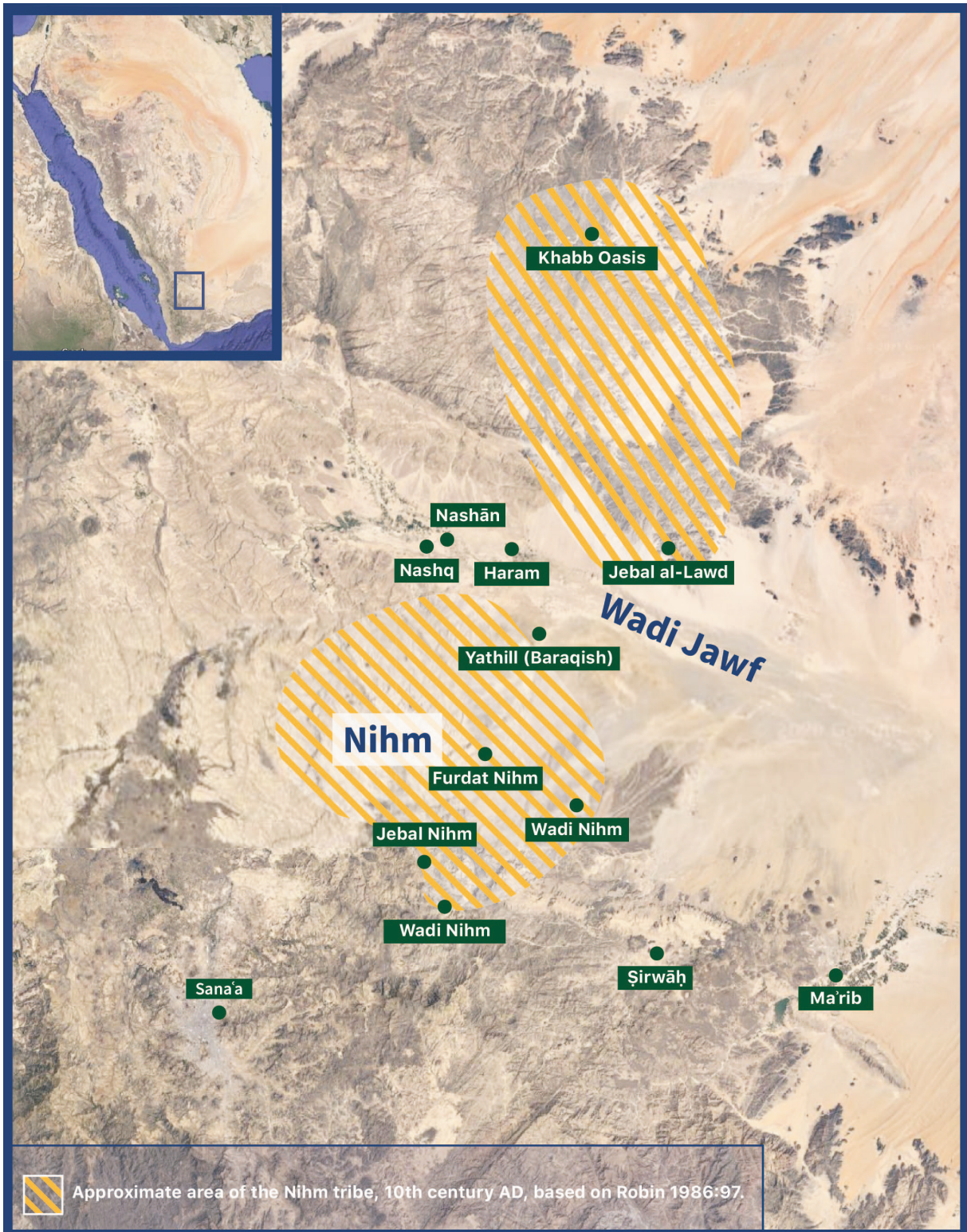
26. Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia*, 2:37, 50.

27. See Gee, "Nahom Maps," 40–42.

28. See Aston, "Origins of the Nihm Tribe," 139.

29. See Aston, "Origins of the Nihm Tribe," 139; Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 76–77.

30. See Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1989), 320–29; Robert Wilson, "Al-Hamdānī's Description of Ḥāshid and Bakīl," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 11 (1981): 95–104.



**FIGURE 3.** Nihm tribal territory, according to Hamdānī (tenth century AD). Map data: Google, © 2021 Terrametrics.

on the north side of the Wadi Jawf, from Jabal al-Lawd to the Khabb oasis (see fig. 3).<sup>31</sup> More to the point, the *Nihm* name is used as both a tribal name and a geographic term in Hamdānī's writings and is applied to both parts of the Nihm tribal territory.<sup>32</sup>

Hamdānī thus provides evidence that the use of *Nihm* as a geographic name for the same general geographic region (along with additional territory to the north) goes back more than a thousand years. Other early Islamic histories make only passing reference to the Nihm, but they indicate that the Nihm had been in this same territory for several centuries by Hamdānī's time. Hisham ibn al-Kalbī (ca. AD 737–819) and Abū 'Abdallah Muḥammad ibn Sa'd (ca. AD 784–845) reported that the Nihm were part of the delegation from Hamdan that converted to Islam and made a covenant with the prophet Muhammed around AD 630.<sup>33</sup> This is corroborated by a letter from Mohammed himself, addressed to the Hamdan tribes and mentioning the Nihm.<sup>34</sup> This places the Nihm in the region north of Sana'a going back to *before* the rise of Islam.<sup>35</sup>

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31. See Robin, "Nihm," 87–93, 97 (map). See also Christian Robin, "Le Pénétration des Arabes Nomades au Yémen," *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 61, no. 1 (1991): 85. However, this may imply more movement/change of the tribal geography than really exists, since according to Serguei Frantsouzoff, the Nihm tribe was still divided into two factions as recently as the 1970s, one living in the present-day Nihm region and the other living in the Amir region to the northwest of the Wadi Jawf. Sergui Frantsouzoff, *Nihm*, 2 vols. (Paris: Diffusion De Boccard, 2016), 1:9. Nonetheless, the Nihm name is no longer topographically applied to the region north of the Jawf, and the Nihm do not *control* any territory to the north, even if pockets of the tribe remain there.

32. See David Heinrich Müller, ed., *Al-Hamdānī's Geographie der arabischen Halbinsel: Nach den Handschriften von Berlin, Constantinopel, London, Paris und Strassburg*, 2 vols. (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1884–1891), 1:49.9; 81.4, 8, 11; 83.8–9; 109.26; 110.2, 4; 126.10; 135.19, 22; 167.15, 19–20; 168.10, 11. See also D. M. Dunlop, "Sources of Gold and Silver in Islam According to al-Hamdānī (10th Century AD)," *Studia Islamica* 8 (1957): 41, 43.

33. See Werner Caskel, *Ġamharat an-nasab: das genealogische Werk des Hišām Ibn Muḥammad al-Kalbī*, 2 vols. (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1966), 2:46–47; Jawad 'Ali, *Al-Mufasssal fi Ta'rikh al-'Arab qabla al-Islam*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-'Ilm lil-Malayin, 1969–1973), 4:187; 7:414.

34. See Aston, "The Origins of the Nihm Tribe," 139. An Arabic transcription and partial English translation of the letter can be read in Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 77.

35. On the borders of the Hamdan in early Islamic sources, see Christian Robin, *Les Hautes-terres du Nord-Yemen avant L'Islam, Part 1: Recherches sur la géographie tribale et religieuse de Hawlān Quḍā'a et du Pays de Hamdān* (Istanbul: Publications de l'Institut historique-archéologique néerlandais de Stamboul, 1982), 41; Christian Julien Robin, "Matériaux pour une prosopographie de l'Arabie antique: les noblesses sabéenne et ḥimyarite avant et après l'Islam," in *Les préludes de l'Islam: Ruptures et continuités dans les civilisations du Proche-Orient, de l'Afrique orientale, de l'Arabie et de l'Inde à la veille de l'Islam*, ed. Christian Julien Robin and Jeremie Schiettecatte (Paris: De Boccard, 2013),

In light of these facts, the use of the Nihm name as a toponym very likely predates its earliest attestation in Hamdānī. After all, the Nihm tribe was established in the same region for centuries before Hamdānī's time (and likely earlier still), and the use of tribal names as toponyms was already common practice at that point, as I will discuss next. As such, the origins of the Nihm as both a tribe and place are most likely to be found in the pre-Islamic period.

### Tribe and Territory in Northern Yemen

This tendency to use tribal names to refer to the lands the tribes occupy is a superficial manifestation of a more deeply rooted conceptual connection between tribes and territory in northern Yemen. According to social anthropologist Marieke Brandt, one of the basic characteristics of Yemeni tribes is that “they are usually associated with a territory, homeland, or tribal area.”<sup>36</sup> Dr. Barak A. Salmoni and his co-authors, all experts in Middle Eastern history and politics, likewise explain:

[One] characteristic relatively unique to Yemeni tribalism is the strong identification of tribe with place. Unlike tribes in parts of Africa or other areas in the Middle East, north Yemeni tribes do not have a tradition of transhumance [seasonal movement], nor is a Bedouin nomadism a social value in tribal collective memories. As sedentary agriculturalists, therefore, Yemeni *qaba'il* [tribes] exhibit a particularly strong attachment to and identification with “their” territories. . . . Place names and tribe names become nearly identical.<sup>37</sup>

Paul Dresch further elaborates on the relationship between tribe and territory, explaining, “The tribes themselves are territorial entities. Usually the territory of each is contiguous, each has known borders with its neighbors, and there are very few points within ‘the land of the tribes’ which do not belong clearly to one tribe or another.”<sup>38</sup> Dresch adds that “the tribes are taken to be geographically fixed, . . . while men and families [who are part of the tribe] need not be.” The tribes “are usually taken ‘always’ to have been where they now are.”<sup>39</sup> This association is so strong

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268, map 4. Since the Nihm were already established in that region when the Hamdan confederation converted to Islam, their origins in the region must go back earlier still.

36. Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 18.

37. Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2010), 47.

38. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*, 75.

39. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*, 77–78.

that “the honour of the tribe,” Dresch explains, “depends on maintaining the ‘inviolability’ of its territory.”<sup>40</sup> As such, defending the honor of the tribe and defending its territorial borders tend to be conceptually and linguistically conflated, “so that ‘defence of the borders’ (*zabn al-ḥudūd*) is an expression of care for the tribe’s good name.”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in northern Yemen, tribes are not just people, but in a sense, they are also places, with definable borders that are part of the region’s geography. The tribe is *identified* with its homeland—the territory is the tribe, in a certain sense, just as much as the tribesmen are.<sup>42</sup> Thus, to violate that territory in any way is to dishonor and commit offence against the tribe. While the tribal system and ideology in Yemen have not been stagnant over the millennia, this is by no means a new or recent development within the tribal ideology in Yemen—it goes back well into antiquity.<sup>43</sup>

In the writings of Hamdānī and other medieval Islamic sources, tribal relationships are described in terms of lineage, a practice that seems to have begun in the late pre-Islamic period (ca. fifth century AD) and continues to this day. Each tribe is represented as being named after an eponymous ancestor, from whom the tribesmen descend, and tribes and subtribes are understood in a father-son relationship.<sup>44</sup> Thus the Nihm were taken to be descendants of an eponymous ancestor who was a descendant of Bakīl, the larger tribal confederation of which Nihm is a part.<sup>45</sup> Anthropologists

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40. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*, 78. Compare Salmoni and others, *Regime and Periphery*, 47, who quote a Yemeni proverb, ‘*izz al-qabili biladah*, meaning “the pride/prestige of a tribe is his land” (translation adapted from Salmoni and others).

41. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*, 80. Compare Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 19: “The protected space on which tribal honour depends is often identified with physical space: that is, with territory.”

42. Najwa Adra, “*Qabyalah* or What Does it Mean to be Tribal in Yemen?,” in *Tribes in Modern Yemen*, 21–38, not only defines *qabīlah* (the Yemeni term for tribe) as “indigenous territorial groups” (p. 22) but also as “a bounded territorial unit.”

43. See Brandt, “The Concept of Tribe,” 12 n. 8, wherein she notes, “In some cases, the continuity of tribal names and their related territories spans almost three millennia.” Significantly, she cites work on the history of Nihm in support of this claim.

44. For background on these genealogies, see Christian Julian Robin, “Tribus et territorios d’Arabie, d’après les inscriptions antiques et les généalogies d’époque islamique,” *Semitica et Classica* 13 (2020): 225–36.

45. See Aston, “Origins of the Nihm Tribe,” 136. The Nihm are still part of Bakīl today (see Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 30; Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*, 24, table 1.2; Salmoni and others, *Regime and Periphery*, 50, fig. 2.2; Robert D. Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Yemen*, 2nd ed. [Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, 2010], 6–7, 157–58).

and historians, however, recognize these tribal genealogies as fictitious constructs primarily meant to represent political and territorial relationships among the tribes.<sup>46</sup> As such, the genealogies shift and change as old tribal alliances deteriorate and new ones form. Furthermore, tribes can move up and down in the lineage as they rise or fall in power.<sup>47</sup> Underneath this superficial idiom of lineage, the organization of tribes in the Yemeni highlands was based primarily on territory,<sup>48</sup> with toponyms and ethnonyms (names of tribes and other ethnic groups) conflated together and both linked to eponymous ancestors.<sup>49</sup> As Brandt notes, “In many regions of Yemen territoriality remained a basic principle since large parts of Yemen’s tribal system . . . remained characterized by an apparent longevity of toponyms and territorial boundaries as opposed to the respective resident population.”<sup>50</sup>

The conceptualization of tribes in genealogical terms was an innovation of the early Islamic period, perhaps with its roots in the practices of Yemeni Jews in the late pre-Islamic period (ca. fifth century AD).<sup>51</sup> For centuries prior, in the pre-Islamic period, tribes were organized and conceptualized in terms of territory and geography. Brandt explains:

The society of the South Arabian kingdoms of the ESA [Early South Arabian] period differs in important respects from that of the tenth century. The evidence from the inscriptions of the pre-Islamic South Arabian

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46. Marieke Brandt, “Heroic History, Disruptive Genealogy: Al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī and the Historical Formation of the Shākir Tribe (Wā’ilah and Dahm) in al-Jawf, Yemen,” *Medieval Worlds: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Studies* 3 (2016): 116–45; Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 225–36.

47. Brandt, “Heroic History,” 118: “Studies on tribal genealogy show that descent lines are in most cases the results of manifold processes of tribal fusion and fission and sometimes even pure constructs. . . . Tribal structures and genealogies are seldom stable, but rather dynamic and deformable so that new political constellations, alliances and territorial changes can be facilitated by genealogical alignments. In many cases genealogy follows a politics of ‘must have been’ rather than biological facts.” Brandt adds that “descent and genealogy are . . . the vocabulary through which [political and territorial] relations [of the tribes and tribal segments] are expressed, regardless of, and often in contradiction to, known biological facts” (p. 136). Compare Adra, “*Qabyalah*,” 22: “Some tribal units self-define in genealogical terms but, as is the case elsewhere, genealogies are used flexibly and manipulated to justify new relationships or break off old ones.”

48. See Brandt, “Heroic History,” 137. Compare Adra, “*Qabyalah*,” 23: “Because of the widespread use of genealogical idioms, tribes are often described as kin groups. Yet in Yemen and elsewhere, most tribal units are territorial, with kinship terminology providing a metaphor to indicate closeness or distance.”

49. Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 236.

50. Brandt, “Heroic History,” 137.

51. Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 232, 235–36.

societies suggests that descent and lineage were of little importance to the bearers of the ESA cultures: its communities were first and foremost territorial units and farming populations in which long elaborate pedigrees were unknown.<sup>52</sup>

The basic social structure of ancient South Arabia was the *sha'ab* (*s²'b*), typically translated as “tribe” but also sometimes translated as “community.”<sup>53</sup> Throughout much of the pre-Islamic period, there was a complex, multitiered structure of tribes and subtribes (or tribal “fractions”), all referred to as *sha'ab* in Sabaic.<sup>54</sup> Specifically speaking of the tribal structure of the Yemeni highlands, Jean-Francois Breton explains:

Each tribe (*sha'ab*) took its name from the territory in which it was located; it belonged to a larger tribe (also called a *sha'ab*) which in turn belonged to a larger *sha'ab*. Thus, the most solid and durable level of the pyramid was that of the tribe, rather than the clan affiliation. . . . This form of tribal organization is very ancient and has been remarkably stable through the ages; indeed, some of the most ancient of these tribes, including the Bakīl, the Hashīd, and the Sinhān, still exist today.<sup>55</sup>

As alluded to here by Breton, the different tribal levels “were all defined by territorial associations rather than strictly through kinship.”<sup>56</sup>

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52. Brandt, “Heroic History,” 136.

53. See Alessandra Avanzini, *By Land and By Sea: A History of South Arabia before Islam Recounted from Inscriptions* (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2016), 57; Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 206–7.

54. See Robin, *Les Hautes-terres du Nord-Yemen*, 71–72; Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 217–18; Christian Robin, “Le problème de Hamdān: Des qayls aux trois tribus,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 8 (1978): 46–52; Andrey Korotayev, “Sabaean Cultural Area in the 1st–4th Centuries AD: Political Organization and Social Stratification of the *Sha'b* of the Third Order,” *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici* 11 (1994): 129–34; Andrey Korotayev, *Ancient Yemen: Some General Trends of Evolution of the Sabaic Language and Sabaean Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Manchester: University of Manchester, 1995), 2–3.

55. Jean-François Breton, *Arabia Felix from the Time of the Queen of Sheba: Eighth Century BC to First Century AD*, trans. Albert LaFarge (Norte Dame, Ind.: University of Norte Dame, 1999), 96. In contrast to Breton’s view that the “tribe took its name from the territory,” Robin, *Les Hautes-terres du Nord-Yemen*, 27, reasons that regional names in the highlands, such as Arḥab, Nihm, Ḥaraz, or Ġahrān, were tribal names *first* and then by extension the names of the tribal territory. In any case, the firm connection between tribe and territory is indisputably evident.

56. Breton, *Arabia Felix*, 95–96. See also Robin, *Les Hautes-terres du Nord-Yemen*, 72–73; A. F. L. Beeston, “Kingship in Ancient South Arabia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 15, no. 3 (1972): 258.

Indeed, the Sabaic term *sha'ab* refers specifically to a “tribal group organized on a political *and territorial* (not genealogical) basis.”<sup>57</sup>

According to Alessandra Avanzini, “the name of a tribe . . . was exclusively territorial and did not refer to a common ancestor.”<sup>58</sup> Avanzini further explains that in the highlands, using the tribal name in the onomastic formula (which was often done using the *nisba*-form) indicated that a “relationship with the tribal group *and its territory* is . . . a privileged identification element.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, tribal names in South Arabian inscriptions are not only sociopolitical but also geopolitical, establishing a connection to both the tribe *and* its territory.

Unsurprisingly, given this strong connection between tribes and territory, tribal names are often used as toponyms in ancient South Arabian inscriptions. “When naming regions and territories,” Christian Robin explains, “South Arabians normally refer to political-tribal organization, that is, kingdoms and tribal groups.”<sup>60</sup> Robert G. Hoyland likewise notes, “In the highlands of south Arabia, . . . to specify an area one would habitually refer to the territory of a tribal group.”<sup>61</sup> Often this is done by

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57. Joan Copeland Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic: Sabaean Dialect* (Cambridge: Harvard Semitic Studies, 1982), 520, emphasis added. Compare A. F. L. Beeston, M. A. Ghul, W. W. Müller, J. Ryckmans, *Sabaic Dictionary (English-French-Arabic)* (Sana'a: University of Sana'a, 1982), 130, “*sedentary* tribe, commune, group of *village communities*” (emphasis in original). This strong territorial association is the reason some prefer the translation of “community” or “commune” over “tribe” for this term. Robin, “Matériaux pour une prosopographie de l'Arabie antique,” 134. To this day, *sha'b*, defined as “people, tribe, nation,” is commonly used in Arabian toponymy. Nigel Groom, *A Dictionary of Arabic Topography and Placenames: A Transliterated Arabic-English Dictionary* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban; London: Longman, 1983), 264.

58. Avanzini, *By Land and By Sea*, 58. Compare Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 218–19.

59. Avanzini, *By Land and By Sea*, 59, emphasis added. Alternatively, Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 214–15, says that *nisba* forms only specified an individual's tribal affiliation and did not (or only rarely) link their identity to city or territory. However, since Robin agrees that tribes were territorially based, and also goes on to say (as quoted in the body of the text) that territories are primarily named after tribal groups, it seems he is splitting hairs here.

60. Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 215, translation mine. The original French reads: “Pour nommer les régions et les territoires, les Sudarabiques se réfèrent normalement à l'organisation politico-tribale, c'est-à-dire aux royaumes et aux groupes tribaux.” Robin goes on to add, “Although geographical appellations are sometimes used to identify territories, they are much less frequent than references to political and tribal divisions” (“Si, pour identifier les territoires, les appellations géographiques sont parfois utilisées, elles sont beaucoup moins fréquentes que la référence aux divisions politiques et tribales,” translation mine).

61. Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 116.



prefacing the tribal name with *ʿrd*, “land,” but this is not always the case. As Robin says, in order “to designate a territory,” inscriptions “usually use the names of the *šʿb* [*shaʿab*, ‘tribe’] preceded or not by the word *ʿrd* (‘land, country’).<sup>62</sup> Numerous examples could be cited.<sup>63</sup> For instance, some inscriptions speak of “the land (*ʿrd*) of Ḥaḍramawt,”<sup>64</sup> but others simply use Ḥaḍramawt in a toponymic way without explicitly calling it a “land” (*ʿrd*).<sup>65</sup> Likewise, several inscriptions mention “the land (*ʿrd*) of Ḥimyar,”<sup>66</sup> while one inscription speaks of people being “on their guard in Ḥimyar” without referring to Ḥimyar specifically as a “land” (*ʿrd*).<sup>67</sup>

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62. See Robin, *Les Hautes-terres du Nord-Yemen*, 73: “pour designer un territoire, on se sert habituellement de noms de *šʿb* precedes ou non du mot *ʿrd* (‘terre, pays’),” translation mine. Compare Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 215: “The most common expression is to say ‘the Land of’ (*arḍ*, *ʿrd*) followed by a kingdom or tribal group name, e.g. ‘the Land of Ḥimyar<sup>um</sup>’ or ‘the Land of Madhḥig<sup>um</sup>’” (“*La tournure la plus commune consiste à dire ‘le Pays de’ (arḍ, ʿrd) suivi par un nom de royaume ou de groupe tribal, par exemple ‘le Pays de Ḥimyar<sup>um</sup>’ ou ‘le Pays de Madhḥig<sup>um</sup>’*,” translation mine). It is hard to square all these statements from Robin with his claim that tribal names “are not toponyms” and “in general, there is no confusion. The inscriptions distinguish always between Ḥimyar [a south Arabian tribe] and ‘the Land of Ḥimyar’” (personal communication to RT, July 27, 2015, quoted in RT, “Nahom and Lehi’s Journey through Arabia”). Robin actually makes a very similar statement in Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 214: “In the mountains of Yemen, the categories ‘social groups’ and ‘toponyms’ are always distinguished” (“*Dans la montagne du Yémen, les catégories ‘groupes sociaux’ et ‘toponymes’ sont toujours distinguées*,” translation mine). It seems to me, in context, that Robin is perhaps meaning to say that tribes do not generally derive their names from toponyms or geographical terms (compare n. 55 herein), *not* that tribal names were not used as toponyms. There are scholars who appear to differ with Robin on this point (see nn. 55, 59, 88 herein), and Robin himself notes that this actually varies by region (pp. 214–15). In any case, in light of these additional statements from Robin (not to mention other scholars cited here), and even the epigraphic evidence discussed in this paper, it seems misguided to use this statement from Robin to claim that “it does not make sense to speak of Nihm as though it were a regular place name.” RT, “Nahom and Lehi’s Journey through Arabia.”

63. See Robin, *Les Hautes-terres du Nord-Yemen*, 73; Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 116, for examples beyond those given here.

64. For “the land of Ḥaḍramawt” (*ʿrd* ḤDRMWT), see epigraphs CIAS 39.11/0 3 n° 4, Ir 13, MB 2002 I-28, and B-L Nashq, *Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions* (hereafter CSAI), accessed May 31, 2023, <http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=26&prjId=1&corId=0&collId=0&navId=0>.

65. See, for example, “he came back towards THMT and Ḥa[ḍramawt]” in CIH 597, and “[to]wns and fortresses of Ḥaḍramaw[t]” in CIH 948, CSAI.

66. For “the land of Ḥimyar” (*ʿrd* ḤMYRM), see Antonini 1998, BR-M Bayḥān 4, CIAS 39.11/0 1 n° 1, CIAS 39.11/0 2 n° 3, CIH 155, CIH 343, CIH 350, CIH 621, Ja 576+577, Ja 578, Ja 579, Ja 580, Ja 586, Ja 740, CIAS 39.11/0 3 n° 5, Gr 185, Ir 9, MAFRAY-al-Miʿsāl 5, Ry 548, YM 18307, CSAI. See also the example of “the land of the Ḥabashites” (*ʿrd* ḤBS<sup>2</sup>T) in CIH 621, CSAI.

67. See RES 2687, CSAI.

Other tribal names are referred to as a “territory” (*bdʿ*), such as “the territory (*bdʿ*) of Maʿīn.”<sup>68</sup> Yet, once again, Maʿīn is also used in toponymic ways without being explicitly designated a “territory” (*bdʿ*). For example, one inscription talks about traveling “on the route between Maʿīn and Rgmtm.”<sup>69</sup> Another talks about using “the road of Maʿīn” as a geographical boundary,<sup>70</sup> and two others speak of “the boundary (*s<sup>3</sup>nn*) of Maʿīn.”<sup>71</sup>

Tribal names are also used in toponymic ways while also being explicitly identified as a “tribe” (*shaʿab*). Thus one inscription speaks of “the borders (*ʿwṭn*) of the tribe (*s<sup>2</sup>ʿbn*) of Ḥashīd” and continues to use similar phrases, such as “the borders (*ʿwṭn*) of the Ḥashīd” and “in the west (*mʿrb*) of Ḥashīd,” without ever explicitly calling Ḥashīd a “land” (*ʿrd*) or a “territory” (*bdʿ*).<sup>72</sup> While several more examples could be cited, these are sufficient to illustrate that tribal names are regularly used as toponyms in the ancient South Arabian inscriptions, sometimes explicitly (prefaced with *ʿrd* or *bdʿ*) and other times implicitly.

Thus, as various sources make clear, using tribal names as toponyms is a practice that goes back to pre-Islamic antiquity. In the case of the *Nihm* name specifically, its toponymic use can be documented back to the early Islamic period, and given the strong link between tribal names and territory in ancient South Arabia, it very likely goes back earlier still. In fact, scholars commenting on inscriptions referring to *nhmyn*, which is the *nisba* form of the NHM name,<sup>73</sup> have interpreted it as referring to both a *tribe* and a *region*.

68. Maʿīn 1, Maʿīn 87, Maʿīn 88, YM 26106, CSAI.

69. M 247, CSAI. See also Rémy Audouin, Jean-François Breton, and Christian Robin, “Towns and Temples: The Emergence of South Arabian Civilization,” in *Yemen: 3000 Years of Art and Civilization in Arabia Felix*, ed. Werner Daum (Innsbruck: Pingin-Verlag; Frankfurt: Umschau-Verlag, 1987), 63; Lindsay, “Nahom/NHM: Only a Tribe, Not a Place?”

70. Haram 2, CSAI.

71. Gr 326 and M 248, CSAI.

72. Ir 12, CSAI. A different inscription (Gl 1362) does use the expression “the land of Ḥashīd” (*ʿrd ḤS<sup>2</sup>DM*).

73. The *-y* is the *nisba* ending, while the terminal *-n* is the definite article. In the ancient South Arabian inscriptions, the *nisba* is most commonly used to express tribal affiliation (see Robin, “Tribus et territoires,” 214–15), but on occasion it was also used to indicate that a person is from a specific city or region (Avanzini, *By Land and By Sea*, 59, cites the example of *ns<sup>2</sup>qyn*, which is the *nisba* of Nashq, the name of a city). It functions similarly to the English gentilic *-ite* suffix, and thus *nisba* forms are often translated using *-ite* (for example, *Nihmite*). On the *nisba* form, see Leonid E. Kogan and Andrey V. Korotayev, “Sayhadic (Epigraphic South Arabian),” in *The Semitic Languages*,

## Nhmyn in Ancient South Arabian Inscriptions

There are several ancient South Arabian inscriptions that refer to *nhmyn* and other forms of the NHM name (see fig. 4), not all of which have received significant attention from Latter-day Saints.<sup>74</sup> A funerary inscription from the third century AD refers to the “Image of Muthawibum the Nihmite.”<sup>75</sup> A list of clans and tribes found among a collection of administrative texts from Nashān, dated to between the first and third centuries AD, includes the Nihmite tribe (*nhmyn*).<sup>76</sup> There are two relevant inscriptions found near the ancient city of Ṣirwāḥ: the first, generally dated to the early first millennium BC, refers to two pairs of “Nihmites” (*nhmynhn*);<sup>77</sup> the other identifies a man named ‘Azizum as both a “Nihmite” (*nhmyn*) and a “Mayda’ite” (*myd’yn*).<sup>78</sup> Finally, there

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ed. Robert Hetzron (New York: Routledge, 1997), 227–28, 230; Norbert Nebes and Peter Stein, “Ancient South Arabian,” in *The Ancient Languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia*, ed. Roger D. Woodward (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 151; Peter Stein, “Ancient South Arabian,” in *The Semitic Languages: An International Handbook*, ed. Stefan Weninger (Göttingen, Ger.: de Gruyter Mouton, 2011), 1050–51.

74. See Neal Rappleye, “Ishmael and Nahom in Ancient Inscriptions,” presentation given at the 2022 FAIR Conference, August 3, 2022. Prior to my presentation at the FAIR Conference, only brief mention of any inscriptions beyond the three altars of Bi’athtar (see n. 79 herein) had been made by Warren Aston and myself in a previous publication (cited in n. 80 herein). See Aston, “History of NaHoM,” 90–93; Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 78–79.

75. CIH 969, CSAI, name transliterations mine. See also CIH 969 (Bombay 40), in Mayer Lambert, “Les Inscriptions Yéménites du Musée de Bombay,” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’archéologie orientale* 20 (1923): 80–81; Alessandra Lombardi, “Le stele sudarabiche denominate ṢWR: monumenti votivi o funerari?,” *Egitto e Vicino Oriente* 37 (2014): 171. For the dating, see K. A. Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, 2 vols. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994–2000), 2:164.

76. YM 11748, CSAI. See also Jacques Ryckmans, Walter W. Müller, and Yusuf M. Abdallah, *Textes du Yémen antique inscrits sur bois* (Leuven, Belg.: Institut Orientaliste, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1994), 46–50, pl. 3A–B. See pages 12–13 for the dating of the collection.

77. RES 5095 (Ry 347), CSAI. See also al-‘Azḡ 1 (Ry 347) and facsimile, in Gonzague Ryckmans, “Inscriptions sud-arabes: Septième série,” *Le muséon: revue d’études orientales* 55 (1942): 125–27; Fakhry, *An Archaeological Journey to Yemen (March–May 1947)*, 1:53, no. 42; 55, fig. 21; Albert Jamme, “Un désastre nabatéen devant Nagran,” *Cahiers de Byrsa* 6 (1956): 166; Albert Jamme, *Miscellanées d’ancien arabe IX* (Washington, DC: self-pub., 1979), 87. The *-nhn* ending of *nhmynhn* makes it the plural or dual form of *nhmyn*. See Kogan and Korotayev, “Sayhadic (Epigraphic South Arabian),” 228; Nebes and Stein, “Ancient South Arabian,” 152; Stein, “Ancient South Arabian,” 1051.

78. Gl 1637, CSAI. See also J. M. Solá Solé, “Inschriften von ed-Duraib, el-Asāhil und einigen anderen Fundorten,” in Maria Höfner and J. M. Solá Solé, *Inschriften aus dem Gebiet zwischen Mārib und dem Ḡōf* (Vienna: Der Österreichischen Akademie der



FIGURE 4. Timeline of select references to the NHM name in South Arabia.

are the three altars well-known to Latter-day Saint scholars that refer to “Bi‘athtar son of Sawdum, lineage of Naw‘um, the Nihmite (*nhmyn*),” found in the foundation of temple 3 at the Bar‘ān temple site near Ma‘rib and dated to around the seventh century BC.<sup>79</sup>

In addition, four inscriptions, all dated to the seventh century BC, refer to persons identified as the “chief” or “tribal leader” (*kbr*) of the

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Wissenschaften, 1961), 40. For the dating, see Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, 2:208. Some have interpreted *nhmyn* in this instance as “stonemason.” See GL1637, Glaser Collection, accessed June 6, 2023, <http://glaser.acdh.oeaw.ac.at/gl/rec/110003337>. The CSAI Database considers both translations a viable possibility. Typically, in a compound *nisba* (as found in this inscription with *nhmyn myd‘yn*), both are considered references to the individual’s tribal affiliations, with one possibly being the subtribe of the other. Also, this inscription’s location near Ṣirwāḥ makes it a likely reference to the Nihm since (1) Ṣirwāḥ is in the Ḥawlān region, which borders the Nihm (see Hermann von Wissmann, *Zur Geschichte und Landeskunde von Alt-Südarabien* [Wien: Böhlau, 1964]), (2) another inscription from Ṣirwāḥ refers to Nihmites (see RES 5095 [Ry 347], CSAI), and (3) evidence suggests that Ṣirwāḥ controlled at least part of the Nihm in the early first millennium BC (see Frantsouzoff, *Nihm*, 1:22, 66, 76–77), thus making it likely that Nihmites would be subservient to the Ṣirwāḥ tribe and make votive offerings at their temple.

79. See Christian Robin and Burkhard Vogt, eds., *Yémen: au pays de la reine de Saba’* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 144; Wilfried Seipel, ed., *Jemen: Kunst und Archäologie im Land der Königin von Saba’* (Wien: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1998), 325; Alessandro de Maigret, ed., *Yemen: Nel paese della Regina di Saba* (Rome: Palazzo Respoli Fondazione Memmo, 2000), 344–45; John Simpson, ed., *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen* (London: The British Museum, 2002), 166–67; Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, 2:18; Norbert Nebes, “Zur Chronologie der Inschriften aus dem Bar‘ān Temple,” *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen* 10 (2005): 115, 119. On the Bar‘ān archaeological site, see Burkhard Vogt, Werner Herberg, and Nicole Röring, “*Arsh Bilqis*”: *The Temple of Almaqah of Bar‘ān in Marib* (Sana‘a: Deutsche Archäologische Institut, 2000); Burkhard Vogt, “Les temples de Ma‘rib: Bar‘ān (aujourd’hui ‘Arsh Bilqis), temple d’Almaqah,” in Robin and Vogt, *Yémen*, 140–41; Burkhard Vogt, “Der Almaqah-Tempel von Bar‘ān (‘Arsh Bilqis),” in Seipel, *Jemen*, 219–22; Jochen Görtsdorf and Burkhardt Vogt, “Radiocarbon Datings from the Almaqah Temple of Bar‘an, Ma‘rib, Republic of Yemen: Approximately 800 CAL BC to 600 CAL AD,” *Radiocarbon* 43, no. 3 (2001): 1363–69. Initial reports dated temple 3 and Bi‘athtar’s inscriptions to the sixth to seventh centuries BC (see Robin and Vogt, *Yémen*, 144; Seipel, *Jemen*, 325; Maigret, *Yemen*, 344–45; Simpson, *Queen of Sheba*, 166–67; Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, 2:18), but temple 3 and Bi‘athtar’s inscription were later redated to a slightly earlier period, around the seventh to eighth centuries BC (see Nebes, “Zur Chronologie der Inschriften aus dem Bar‘ān Temple,” 115, 119; and Vogt, Herberg, and Röring, “*Arsh Bilqis*”). In either case, I believe the ruler named Yada‘il mentioned in the inscription is most likely Yada‘il Dhariḥ, son of Sumhu‘ali, who conducted several temple-building projects in the early to mid-seventh century BC, and thus I consider the seventh century BC the most likely dating of the text. On Yada‘il Dhariḥ, son of Sumhu‘ali, see William D. Glanzman, “An Examination of the Building Campaign of Yada‘il Dhariḥ bin Sumhu‘alay, *mukarrrib* of Saba’, in Light of Recent Archaeology,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 33 (2003): 183–98; Avanzini, *By Land and By Sea*, 114.

*nhmt* or *nhmtn*, which are potentially references to Nihm.<sup>80</sup> A pre-Islamic graffiti text from north of Najran near Ḥimā may also refer to “Madid, son of Sa‘dum, the Nihmite (*nhmyn*).”<sup>81</sup>

Some scholars have interpreted these references as identifying members of the NHM tribe. Joseph M. Solá Solé, for instance, considered *nhmyn* an attestation of the “well-known tribal name NHM.”<sup>82</sup> Jacques Ryckmans likewise interpreted the *nhmyn* of the various inscriptions as references to the Nihm tribe south of the Wadi Jawf.<sup>83</sup> Norbert Nebes considered *nhmyn* as referring to the Nihm tribe but indicated that the tribe was “undoubtedly north of the Jawf,” a location that would partially overlap with the

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80. See *kbr nhmt* in CIH 673, and *kbr nhmtn* in Haram 16, Haram 17, Haram 19, CSAI. For the dating of these inscriptions, see Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, 2:120 (the Haram texts), 139 (CIH 673). For the Haram texts, see also Christian Robin, *Inabbaʿ, Haram, Al-Kāfir, Kamna et al-Ḥarāshif*, 2 vols. (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 1992), 1:85–89. On interpreting these as references to Nihm, see Neal Rappleye, “An Ishmael Buried near Nahom,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 48 (2022): 36, 44 nn. 21–23. The *-t(n)* ending in these texts may indicate that this is the collective form of the NHM name. Compare A. F. L. Beeston, “Habashat and Aḥābīsh,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 17 (1986): 5–9, who argues that *ḥbs<sup>2</sup>t* and *ḥbs<sup>2</sup>tn* are collective forms of the ḤBS<sup>2</sup> name (Ḥabash). Hence, the expression *mlk ḥbs<sup>2</sup>tn* is translated “Habashite king” (CIH 308, CSAI). The expression *kbr nhmt* or *kbr nhmtn* is a similar construct of high-ranking leader (*kbr*) + tribal/group name (*nhmt*, *nhmtn*), and I would propose it should similarly be translated as “chief of the Nihmites.”

81. See Ph. 160 n. 20 (JML-F-74), in Albert van den Branden, *Les Textes Thamoudéens de Philby*, 2 vols. (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste and Publications Universitaires, 1956), 1:52. Christian Julien Robin and others, *A Stopover in the Steppe: The Rock Carvings of ‘Ān Jamal near Ḥimā (Region of Najrān, Saudi Arabia)* (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2022), 266, translate *nhmyn* as “stonecutter” here but acknowledge that Nihmite is also a possible translation (p. 451). Since the *nisba* form is completely unknown in the local (Himaitic) inscriptions from this region (per Robin and Gorea), the use of *nhmyn* indicates that this individual was most likely a caravaner/traveler from South Arabia. See Christian Julien Robin and Maria Gorea, “L’alphabet de Ḥimā (Arabie Séodite),” in *Alphabets, Texts and Artifacts in the Ancient Near East: Studies Presented to Benjamin Sass*, ed. Israel Finkelstein, Christian Robin, and Thomas Römer (Paris: Van Dieren Éditeur, 2016), 310–75. Van den Branden (pp. 23–24) argued that these texts should be dated to between the late second and late third centuries AD, but others had dated them to much later, around the fifth to sixth centuries AD. Robin and Gorea (pp. 330–35) indicate that Himaitic texts are currently undatable, hence I have simply used the vague designation of “pre-Islamic” to define the date of this inscription. See also Mounir Arbach and others, “Results of Four Seasons of Survey in the Province of Najran (Saudi Arabia): 2007–2010,” in *South Arabia and Its Neighbours: Phenomena of Intercultural Contacts*, ed. Iris Gerlach (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2015), 37–39.

82. Solá Solé, “Inschriften von ed-Duraib, el-Asāhil und einigen anderen Fundorten,” 40: “bekanntes Stammesnamen nhm,” translation mine.

83. See Ryckmans and others, *Textes du Yémen*, 47.

Nihm territory documented in Hamdānī's writings (see fig. 3) but differs somewhat from its present-day location *south* of the Jawf.<sup>84</sup>

Others have specifically interpreted these references as identifying people from the NHM region. Mounir Arbach, for example, identified *nhmyn* as an ethnic name, which he defined as “those [names] designating the inhabitants of a territory or a country.”<sup>85</sup> Based on this definition, *nhmyn* would, of course, refer specifically to an inhabitant of the NHM territory or country. Likewise, Burkhard Vogt, followed by others, defined *nhmyn* as someone who “comes from the Nihm region, west of Mārib,”<sup>86</sup> thus identifying it as the present-day Nihm region.

Finally, consistent with the close connection between tribe and territory discussed above, some have interpreted these references as indicating *both* a tribe and a region. Hermann von Wissmann, one of the early pioneers of the pre-Islamic tribal geography of Yemen, used references to *nhmyn* and *nhmt* as evidence for both a tribe and a land or region of NHM, which he believed was in the same general areas as the Nihm of Hamdānī's time (see fig. 3).<sup>87</sup> More recently, Peter Stein considered *nhmyn* an attestation of the tribal name NHM but classified tribal names under the rubric of “toponyms.” He thus included NHM—identified as present-day Nihm—on a map showing

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84. Norbert Nebes, commentary on “Les autels du temple Bar'ân à Ma'rib,” in Robin and Vogt, *Yemen*, 144. I explore the potential implications that relocating (or extending) Nihm to the north of Jawf has on equating it with Nahom in Neal Rappleye, “The Nahom Convergence Reexamined: The Eastward Trail, Burial of the Dead, and the Ancient Borders of Nihm,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* (forthcoming).

85. Mounir Arbach, *Les noms propres du Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum, pars IV: Inscriptiones Himyariticas et sabaes continens* (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2002), 15. Arbach is defining his category III names as “Names of Tribes and Ethnic Groups” (“*Noms de tribus et groupes ethniques*,” translation mine). He includes two types of names in this category: (1) “names which are preceded by the term *s<sup>2</sup>'b*, which signifies ‘tribe,’” and (2) “those designating the inhabitants of a territory or a country” (“*les noms qui sont précédés par le terme s<sup>2</sup>'b, qui signifie ‘tribu’, ceux désignant les habitants d'un territoire ou d'un pays*,” translation mine). Since *nhmyn* is not preceded by *s<sup>2</sup>'b*, its inclusion in this category as an *ethnique* name (see p. 295) rather than a tribal name logically means it is the *second* of the two types—a name “designating the inhabitants of a territory or a country.”

86. Burkhard Vogt, commentary on catalog no. 240, in Seipel, *Jemen*, 325: “*dem Gebiet Nihm, westlich von Ma'rib*,” English translation in Simpson, *Queen of Sheba*, 166. Compare Maigret, *Yemen*, 345: “*della zona di Nihm a [ov]est di Marib*,” translation mine.

87. See von Wissmann, *Zur Geschichte und Landeskunde von Alt-Südarabien*, 96–97, 294–95 (map), 307–8. More recently, Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 564, followed von Wissmann in presenting both a northern and southern Nihm in pre-Islamic times.

an “overview of places . . . as well as other identifiable toponyms, which are mentioned in the well-known minuscule inscriptions.”<sup>88</sup> Thus Stein essentially treated *nhmyn* as evidence of both a tribe and a region.

Given this range of interpretation among scholars of ancient South Arabia, it is unnecessarily reductive when talking about the Book of Mormon to insist that *nhmyn* can only be considered evidence for a *tribe* and therefore does not support the Book of Mormon’s reference to a *place* called Nahom (NHM).

## Conclusion

As is clear from the above evidence, the name *Nihm* (and its variant spellings) has deep roots far into the past as both a tribal name and a toponym and is part of a long-standing, ancient tradition in Yemen, where tribes have been strongly linked to their territories for millennia. The use of *Nihm* as a place name, specifically, is documented back more than a thousand years into the early Islamic period and is very likely older still. This situates the origins of *Nihm* as a geographic name back into the pre-Islamic era, when several inscriptions referring to *nhmyn* indicate there was a tribal entity—and by extension, likely a region—known by the NHM name.

Among the ancient South Arabian inscriptions, tribal names are regularly used as toponyms, sometimes by specifically being called the “land” (*ʿrd*) or “territory” (*bqʿ*) of the tribe. On other occasions, the tribe’s name could simply be used in toponymic ways without any geographic qualifiers. Furthermore, tribal names in the South Arabian inscriptions are understood to link a person to both a tribe *and* its territory. Looking specifically at occurrences of *nhmyn* in several ancient South Arabian inscriptions, scholars have interpreted these references as indicating affiliation with both the tribe *and* region of Nihm.

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88. Peter Stein, *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelinschriften auf Holzstäbchen aus der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in München*, 2 vols. (Tübingen, Ger.: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 2010), 1:22: “Eine Übersicht der genannten Orte sowie weiterer identifizierbarer Toponyme, welche in den bekannten Minuskelinschriften,” 22 n. 43, 23 fig. 1, translation courtesy of Stephen O. Smoot. On the map, NHM is in the category of “other place, tribal, or regional names mentioned in the minuscule inscriptions” (“*anderer in den Minuskelinschriften erwähnter Orts-, Stammes- oder Landschaftsname*,” translation courtesy of Stephen O. Smoot). Stein indexes the names of tribes (*stamm*) and nisba (*nisbe*) as toponyms (*toponyme*), illustrating more broadly that tribal names are, in fact, treated as toponyms by some scholars of ancient South Arabian studies, contrary to the assertion of Robin that tribal names “are not toponyms” (personal communication to RT, July 27, 2015, quoted in RT, “Nahom and Lehi’s Journey through Arabia”).



In biblical studies, scholars have debated over the meaning of the name “Israel” in the Merneptah stela (ca. 1209 BC). The Egyptian text “uses the determinative (semantic indicator) for an ethnic group, and not for a geographic region or city.”<sup>89</sup> Yet some have debated whether the name *Israel* “referred originally to a geographical region and was subsequently appropriated by or applied to the mixed population of the central hill country.”<sup>90</sup> While the reference to Israel is indeed to a people and not a geographic name, some scholars have pointed out that given the fact that the names of regions and the tribes that occupy them are typically one and the same, the whole debate seems to be unnecessarily splitting hairs. As J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hays put it, “We should probably not make too much either of the determinative that identifies Israel as a foreign people rather than a foreign land. As is the case with the name ‘Moab,’ which also makes its first appearance in Egyptian texts about this time, ‘Israel’ may have referred loosely to both a subregion of Palestine and the people who lived there.”<sup>91</sup>

In light of the evidence presented here, I suggest we likewise “should probably not make too much” of whether the *nhmyn* of ancient South Arabian texts refers to members of a tribe or to the inhabitants of a specific region. There is far more ambiguity in this case (in comparison with *Israel* in the Merneptah stela), and when considered in the context of the conceptual relationship between tribe and place, it hardly seems worth trying to split hairs over which interpretation is preferable. Given the proper understanding of tribes and their territory in ancient Yemen, there is little difficulty in linking a tribe in ancient inscriptions with what is called a “place” in the Book of Mormon.

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89. James K. Hoffmeier, “The (Israel) Stela of Merneptah,” in *The Context of Scripture*, 3 vols., ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Boston: Brill, 2003), 2:41.

90. James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 27, summarizing the argument of Göstra Ahlström. See also pages 28–30.

91. J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 42.