

STUDIA ONOMASTICA CORANICA: *AL-RAQĪM*, CAPUT NABATAEAE*

MEHDY SHADDEL

INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

باز پر چین شونت روی و بخندی بفسوس

چون بخوانم ز قرآن قصه اصحاب رقیم¹

Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d.1088 CE)

Abstract

One of the many Quranic terms whose meaning has long vexed the minds of traditional Muslim commentators and students of the secular discipline of Quranic studies alike is the word *al-raqīm*, a *hapax legomenon* that appears in Qurʾān 18:9, at the beginning of the story of the ‘companions of the cave’. The present study aims to show that this term is a toponym that should be identified with Petra, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Nabataea.

The story of the ‘companions of the cave’ — also referred to as the ‘youths’ in the Qurʾān and better known as the ‘long-sleepers of Ephesus’ outside the Islamic tradition — is a legend of great antiquity whose origins can be traced to the early centuries of the Common Era.² The Quranic version of the story is found in vv. 9–26 of the

* I am most indebted to Tommaso Tesei (Van Leer Jerusalem Institute), Hossein Sheikh (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen), Emmanouela Grypeou (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Corpus Coranicum, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften), Guillaume Dye (Université Libre de Bruxelles), Majid Montazermahdi (University of Exeter) and Ahmad Al-Jallad (Universiteit Leiden) for their constructive comments on this essay. It goes without saying that the responsibility for all the remaining errors remains solely with me.

¹ ‘Your countenance becomes furrowed again and you laugh with sorrow [or, ‘you laugh in Ephesus’], whenever I recite from the Qurʾān the story of the companions of *raqīm*.’

² For the roots and earliest versions of this legend, see P.W. van der Horst, ‘Pious Long-Sleepers in Pagan, Jewish and Christian Antiquity’, in M. Kister, H. Newman, M. Segal and R.A. Clements (eds) *Tradition, Transmission, and Transformation, from Second Temple Literature through Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity* (Leiden

18th *sūra* of the Qurʾān, *sūrat al-Kahf*, which owes its title to this story. However, we are here only interested in an enigmatic term that occurs right at the beginning of the narrative, in verse 9: *am ḥasibta anna aṣḥāba l-kahfi wa l-raqīmi kānū min āyātina ʿajaban*, ‘do you reckon the companions of the cave and of *al-raqīm* to be among Our wondrous signs?’³

The exegetical tradition presents us with five possible meanings for *al-raqīm*: first, that it is a toponym, the city of the companions of the cave or the city in whose vicinity the cave was located.⁴ Second, that it is a toponym, but has nothing to do with the companions of the cave. Rather, *aṣḥāb al-raqīm* were another group of people with a different saga totally unrelated to *aṣḥāb al-kahf*; if they have been mentioned together it is presumably because both stories are among God’s ‘wondrous signs’.⁵ Third, that *al-raqīm* was the name of the cave (or the mountain) in which the ‘youths’ took refuge.⁶ And fourth, that *al-raqīm* refers to the inscription in which the names of these youths were recorded.⁷ The Quranic version of the story, no doubt, lacks any explicit reference to an inscription, but in some post-Quranic versions of the legend — which are clearly influenced by Christian lore — after the companions go to the cave two closet Christians inscribe their names and a summary of the affair on a tablet and erect it at the cave’s entrance. This interpretation came to dominate the tradition in later times⁸ and seems to have found favour with modern scholarship as well.⁹ According to the fifth

2015), 93–111; preprinted in idem, *Studies in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden 2014), 248–66.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of primary source materials are mine.

⁴ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo 1422/2001), xv, 157–9 (being a *crux interpretum*, the Islamic exegetical tradition is overly preoccupied with the significance of the term and almost all *tafsīrs* dedicate some space to it, but, given that their comments are mostly repetitions of each other’s, I refrain from being exhaustive and confine myself to citing al-Ṭabarī and al-Suyūṭī).

⁵ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-mantūr fi l-tafsīr bi l-maʾtūr*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo 1424/2003), ix, 489–95.

⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, xv, 160; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-mantūr*, ix, 487.

⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, xv, 159, 161; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-mantūr*, ix, 488.

⁸ However, I have only been able to find the mention of the two Christians in Muqāṭil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd Šihāta (Beirut 1423/2002), ii, 574.

⁹ Some scholars, however, have opted to emend the text. C.C. Torrey, ‘Three Difficult Passages in the Koran’, in T.W. Arnold and R.A. Nicholson (eds), *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne on His 60th Birthday*

interpretation, *al-raqīm* was the name of their dog that accompanied them to the cave and awoke with them three centuries later.¹⁰

The first interpretation to be dismissed is the last one, for the *textus receptus* records the verse as *anna aṣḥāba 'l-kahfi wa'l-raqīmi*. Assuming that the *textus receptus* has been preserved faithfully at this place, we can see that *al-raqīmi* is in the genitive (*majrūr*), and thus could not be the dog's name, for in that case the verse would read 'companions of the cave and of the dog'.¹¹ We should also reject the second possibility, for there is nothing in the text of the Qur'ān to suggest that two groups are involved here; the remainder of the pericope is solely preoccupied with the story of the sleepers and no other story in the rest of the *sūra* can plausibly be connected to this verse, as it evidently belongs within the pericope.

With respect to the suggestion that *raqīm* may signify 'writing' or 'inscription', an insuperable objection that might be raised is that this usage is virtually unattested in Arabic despite the fact that the root's derivatives are quite commonly encountered.¹² What is more, one may wonder why the Qur'ān should use such a morphologically

(Cambridge 1922), 457–71, pp. 457–9, suggested that *rqym* should be emended to *dqys*, the Aramaic form of Decius' name (for a rebuttal cf. Josef Horowitz comments in his *Koranische Untersuchungen* [Berlin 1926], 95); according to James Bellamy, 'al-Raqīm or al-Ruqūd? A Note on Sūrah 18:9', *JAOS* 111 (1991), 115–17, *wa'l-raqīm* is to be emended to *al-ruqūd*; and for Christoph Luxenburg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin 2007), 80–1, *raqīm* is a 'misreading' of *ruqād*.

¹⁰ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manẓūr*, ix, 489.

¹¹ The term should have been in the accusative (*manṣūb*) had it been the dog's name, but no such variant (and indeed no variant at all) is attested for this verse. See Aḥmad Muḥtār 'Umar and 'Abd al-'Āl Sālim Makram, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt al-qur'āniyya* (Kuwait 1408/1988), iii, 349; and 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Ḥaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt* (Damascus 1422/2002), v, 154 ff.

¹² The term is actually twice attested outside the Qur'ān: at the beginning of the first sermon of the *Nahj al-balāgha*; and in a *ḥadīṭ* cited by Ibn Manẓūr in his *Lisān al-'Arab*, s.v. *r-q-m* (brought to my attention by one of the anonymous referees). Interestingly, however, in both instances it seems to have the denotation of 'arrow' — which obviously does not fit the Quranic context. In the first instance, it is used to liken the heavens to a 'light, piercing, fast-moving' arrow (*fī falakin dā'irin wa-saqfin sā'irin wa-raqīmīn mā'irin*) — it must be borne in mind that the adjective *mā'ir* is almost always used of the substantive 'arrow'; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, s.v. *m-w-r*; al-Firūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīt*, s.v. *m-'r*. In the second instance it has been applied in conjunction with the term 'arrow', and is apparently to be understood as synonymous with it (*kāna yusawwī bayna 'l-ṣufuf ḥattā yada'abā miṭl al-qidh aw al-raqīm*). In any event, I tend to share L. Kopf's scepticism of the lexicographical tradition; see his 'Religious Influences on Medieval Arabic Philology', *Studia Islamica* 5 (1956), 33–59.

strange form of the trilateral radical, whilst elsewhere it uses the expected *mafʿūl* form to designate something ‘written’ or ‘inscribed’ (Qurʾān 83:9, which speaks of a ‘written book’, *kitāb marqūm*).¹³ Sidney Griffith has tried to explain away the problem by suggesting that it might be a ‘Syriacism’: ‘the likely scenario would be that the form of the Syriac passive participle (*fʿīl*), used as a substantive adjective (*fāʿīl*), has been imported into Arabic diction to produce the anomalous *al-raqīm*, presumably originally by an Arabic-speaking Christian with a Syriac-speaking background.’¹⁴ But Griffith’s ‘translator’ must have been an eccentric person to have failed in producing an idiomatic rendering at only one place in a rather lengthy and arguably lucid text. Griffith’s argument is, in the main, based upon the reference to the inscription in Jacob of Sarūg’s (d. 521 CE) homily on the sleepers of Ephesus. This, however, hardly constitutes new evidence in favour of the claim; one does well to remember that the Muslim commentators who took the term to mean ‘inscription’ had doubtlessly been themselves influenced by the reference to it in the Christian versions of the legend. Griffith further contends that ‘*al-raqīm* could just possibly mean “inscription” or “tablet”’, citing Lane’s *Arabic-English Lexicon* as his source. Again, it must be remembered that Lane is himself reliant on the tradition for the meaning of the term. Moreover, the fact that the term is not attested with any other meaning¹⁵ may simply be an indication that it is a toponym, as pointed out above. Griffith’s arguments are thus entirely circular and reveal nothing new, and, generally, the affinities he adduces between the Syriac and Quranic versions are so general and so common to most versions of the legend that they fail to convince one of the existence of a ‘Syriac background’, as he claims, to the Quranic narrative. The tablet interpretation does not seem to be anything more than ingenious conjecture on the part of the exegetes and hardly reflects their knowledge as to the true signification of the word. We are thus left with two possibilities: that *al-raqīm* is the name of the mountain/cave, or that it is the name of a town — in any case a toponym.

Some medieval geographical compendia and annals do indeed record the name of a town called al-Raqīm; however, these entries

¹³ Contra Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 95, who adduces this latter verse in support of the inscription interpretation!

¹⁴ Griffith, ‘Christian Lore and the Arabic Qurʾān: The “Companions of the Cave” in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition’, in G.S. Reynolds (ed.), *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context* (London 2008), 109–37, pp. 126–7.

¹⁵ But cf. *supra*, note 12.

have gone totally unnoticed by more recent scholarship. Here one gets the impression that scholars have deliberately neglected this evidence, either because it is deemed too meagre or because it is assumed that these are cross-pollinations from the attempts of the *tafsīr* tradition at a factitious identification. Be that as it may, I contend that these reports could be vindicated and in what follows I will produce corroborative evidence in their support. Afterwards, I will attempt a reappraisal of the evidence of the Muslim tradition.

RQM, the Semitic Name of Petra

In 1965 the French archaeologist Jean Starcky published a report about, *inter alia*, an important find, an otherwise mundane funerary inscription mentioning a place called RQMW which, Starcky opined, was to be identified as the Semitic name of Petra. The basis for this identification was the reference to the town as RQM in the Targumim and other rabbinic writings and as Rekem(ē), Arekemē, and Arkem in Josephus and Eusebius.¹⁶ The first-century epitaph, discovered at the entrance to the Sīq leading to the archaeological site of Petra, near modern-day Wādī Mūsā, reads as follows:

d' npš ptrys br / trpṭs wyqr 'ry / hwh brqmw dy myt / bgršw wqbyr tmh dy / 'bd [']lh¹⁷ tymw rbnh

This is the funerary monument of PTRYS, son of TRPṬS, the honoured one who was in RQMW, who died in GRŠW and was buried there, [and] who was a servant of the god of TYMW, his lord.¹⁸

¹⁶ J. Starcky, 'Nouvelles stèles funéraires à Pétra', *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 10 (1965), 43–9, pp. 44–5. My discussion here follows from his 'Nouvelle épitaphe nabatéenne donnant le nom sémitique de Pétra', *Revue biblique* 72 (1965), 95–7, p. 96.

¹⁷ The text as given by Starcky here reads *lh*. However, I have inserted an *ālap* in order to arrive at a more sensible reading. Starcky's reading does not seem to be erroneous at this point; it thus seems to be a mistake on the part of the engraver.

¹⁸ Text and French translation in Starcky, 'Nouvelles stèles', 44; idem, 'Nouvelle épitaphe', 95; text and German translation — with a survey of previous scholarship — in U. Hackl, H. Jeni and C. Schneider, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Nabatäer: Textsammlung mit Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Freiburg 2003), 221; see also I. Kottsieper, 'Sam'alische und aramäische Texte', in *Grab-, Sarg-, Bau- und Votivinschriften* (Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments neue Folge 6, Munich 2011), 321–32, pp. 324–5 (I owe this reference to Hossein Sheikh); and L. Nehmé, *Atlas archéologique et épigraphique de Pétra*, vol. i: *De Bāb as-Sīq au Wādī al-Farasah* (Paris 2012), 165 (my thanks to the compiler for providing me with the relevant part of the book).

Starcky renders the last line ‘que lui a faite Taimu son maître’, and is followed in this by later commentators. But this reading is hardly tenable given that the only possible referent of the clause (the term *nps*) has been separated from it by several intervening sentences. I have, therefore, opted to emend the text to read ‘who was a servant of the god of TYMW’. In support of this new reading, it must be pointed out that the formula ‘the god of so-and-so’ is quite commonly encountered in Nabataean inscriptions – with or without reference to the name of the deity him/herself.¹⁹ In some cases, the person mentioned is the king, with the inscription reading ‘the god of our lord (*ʾlh mr’n*), so-and-so’.²⁰ In any event, we need not worry about the reading of the rest of the inscription, for the issue at hand here is the name RQMW, whose reading seems certain. It must, however, be noted that the final *wāw* of RQMW is a peculiarity observed in some substantives in Nabataean Aramaic.²¹

The Semitic name of Petra, in the form RQM, also shows up in a Syriac document brought to light for the first time in 1977 by Sebastian Brock. In this document, a letter attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 387 CE) on the attempt to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple during the reign of Julian the ‘Apostate’, we read of the destruction wreaked by the earthquake of 363 CE,²² in which many cities of Palestine and Provincia Arabia were partially or totally destroyed, including ‘more than half of RQM’ (*rqm ytyr mn klh*).²³ Brock readily identifies RQM with Petra in his translation.²⁴

The name RQM is actually attested in another Syriac text that has been known since the early twentieth century, but has gone unnoticed since its first commentator, François Nau, had failed to identify the place. This text is the Syriac *Vita of Barṣawmā* (d. c. 456 CE),

¹⁹ J.F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus* (Leiden 2001), 151–2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

²¹ F. de Blois, ‘Who is King Amarō?’ *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 6 (1995), 196–8, p. 198 (n. 8); see also the references in note 66 *infra*.

²² On this event, now see D.B. Levenson, ‘The Palestinian Earthquake of May 363 in Philostorgius, the Syriac *Chronicon miscellaneum*, and the Letter Attributed to Cyril on the Rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6 (2013), 60–83.

²³ S.P. Brock, ‘A Letter Attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem on the Rebuilding of the Temple’, *BSOAS* 40 (1977), 267–86, p. 271. Brock dates the letter to the early fifth century CE; *ibid.*, 283. He later discovered further witnesses to this composition; Brock, ‘Review of M.N. Goshen-Gottstein, *Syriac Manuscripts in the Harvard College Library: A Catalogue*’, *JSS* 26 (1981), 317–21, p. 321.

²⁴ Brock, ‘Letter Attributed to Cyril’, 276.

a work of hagiographical nature narrating the miraculous life of its eponymous character. According to the *Vita*, in his itinerary through Palestine, Phoenicia, and Arabia, Barṣawmā happened upon an idolatrous people who shunned him, refusing to allow him in ‘a great city of theirs, called RQM d-G’Y’.²⁵

RQM d-G’Y’²⁶ seems to be the full name of Petra to distinguish it from another RQM, RQM d-ḤGRH. Both of these RQMs are known to us from rabbinic sources. These sources, and especially the Targumim, as well as the Syriac Peshitta, equate RQM²⁷ with biblical Qādeš, and RQM d-ḤGRH with Qādeš Barnē’a.²⁸ RQM G’Y’ (along with RQM d-ḤGRH) shows up in a late-ancient list of the border towns of Ereš Yisrā’ēl. This list begins with Ashkelon, thence moves northwards, then eastwards, southwards, and thence back to Ashkelon. The final part reads, ‘Upper Tarngōlā above Caesarea [Philippi], Bēt SWKT, and RQM d-ḤGRH, Trachonitis, which is in the district of Bosra, Ḥešbōn, Yabbōq, the brook-valley of Zered and Ygar SKWTH, Nimrīn, MLḤ d-ZRW’Y and RQM GY’H, and the gardens of Ashkelon’.²⁹ The clockwise revolution of (identifiable) locations in this list around Jerusalem comports with the identification of RQM GY’H as Petra. G’Y’ itself is most likely to be identified with modern Wādī Mūsā — also called al-Jī nowadays — near Petra.³⁰

²⁵ F. Nau, ‘Résumé de monographies syriaques’, *Revue de l’Orient chrétien* 18 (1913), 379–89, pp. 382–3. Unfortunately, the Syriac *Vita of Barṣawmā* has not so far appeared in a critical edition and I had to rely on Nau’s summary of the text, interspersed with direct quotations.

²⁶ Various spelt G’Y’, GY’, and GY’H.

²⁷ M. McNamara, ‘Τὸ δὲ (Ἀγὰρ) Σινᾶ ὄρος ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ (Gal 4:25a): Paul and Petra’, in idem, *Targum and New Testament: Collected Essays* (Tübingen 2011), 460–79, p. 468 (n. 31; originally published in *Milltown Studies* 2 [1978], 24–41), identifies this RQM as RQM d-G’Y’.

²⁸ G.I. Davies, ‘Hagar, el-Heḡra and the Location of Mount Sinai: With an Additional Note on Reqem’, *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972), 152–63, p. 160. For the Peshitta, see R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford 1901), 3978, s.v. ‘RQM’.

²⁹ Tosefta Shebi’it 4:11; the translation follows from the German translation in P. Freimark and W.-F. Krämer, *Die Tosefta, Seder i: Zeraim, 2: Demai – Schebiit* (Stuttgart 1971), 197–207. I will get back to this gazetteer in due course.

³⁰ Z. al-Salameen and H. Falahat, ‘Two New Nabataean Inscriptions from Wādī Mūsā: With Discussions of Gaia and the *Marzēah*’, *JSS* 57 (2012), 37–51, p. 41. To the evidence collected in this article we may add Stephan of Byzantium’s reference to Gaia as ‘a city near Petra in Arabia’; *Stephani Byzantii Ethnica*, ed. and tr. Margarethe Billerbeck (Berlin 2006), vol. i, 410; cited by J. Retsö, ‘Petra and Qadesh’, *Svensk exegetisk årsbok* 76 (2011), 115–36, p. 117. Later (ibid., 118,

Mention should also be made of a homily attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea (d. c. 340 CE), preserved only in a Syriac translation, wherein Petra is glossed with the statement ‘the city called RQM d-GY’ in the tongue of [the people of] Mesopotamia’ (*pṭr*³¹ *mdynt’ dmtqry’ blš’n’ dbyt nbryn rqm dgy*).³² This brief, hitherto-unnoticed piece of evidence is the first proof positive that RQM d-G’Y’ was indeed the same place as Petra.

The name, in the gentilic form *rqmy*’, also appears in another well-known text, *The Book of the Laws of Countries* by Bardaišān of Edessa (d. 222 CE), which holds the distinction of being the oldest extant Syriac composition. Here the ‘law of the people of RQM’ (*nmws’ drqmy*) and the ‘land of the people of RQM’ (*byt rqmy*) are mentioned together with those of the Edessenes and the Arabs.³³

Greek Sources

In his account of the war between Moses’ Israelites and the Midianites in his *Antiquitates Judaicae*, Jewish historian Flavius Josephus famously contrived a popular etymology for the Semitic name of Petra. According to Josephus, all of the five kings of the Midianites perished in the battle, including their fifth, Rekemos (Rokom in the Septuagint, Reqem in the Hebrew Bible). He then adds,

the city which bears his name (*hou polis epōnumos*) ranks highest in the land of the Arabs (*Arabōn*) and to this day is called by the whole Arabian nation (*pantos tou Arabiou*) after the name of its royal founder, Rekemē: it is the Petra of the Greeks (*Petra par’ Ellēsi legomenē*).³⁴

n. 22), Retsö briefly entertains the idea that the Quranic *raqīm* may have been Petra, only to dismiss it as a ‘secondary association’.

³¹ The edited text mistakenly has *pṭr*’.

³² W. Wright, ‘Eusebius of Caesarea on the Star’, *Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* 9 (1866), 117–36, p. 130. Cf. Eusebius’ entry for Petra in his *Onomasticon* further *infra*.

³³ H.J.W. Drijvers, *The Book of the Laws of Countries: Dialogue on Fate of Bardaišān of Edessa* (Piscataway 2007), 46; cited by Ziyād al-Salāmīn (Z. al-Salameen), ‘Riqīm/al-raqīm fi mašādir al-ta’rihiyya wa’l-naqšīyya’, *Majallat al-jam’iyya al-ta’rihiyya al-sa’ūdiyya* 31 (1436/2015), 7–35, pp. 20–1. On this occurrence, see A. Schall, ‘Eine “unbekannte Völkerschaft” im “Buch der Gesetze der Länder”’, *ZDMG* 99 (1945–50), 202–3 (my thanks to Sergey Minov for drawing my attention to this article). Ahmad Al-Jallad has recently discovered a Safaitic inscription from northeastern Jordan, bearing the names RQM and ‘MN, in a likely reference to Petra and Amman. He hopes to publish the inscription in the near future.

³⁴ Josephus, Ant. 4:161. The translation comes from *Josephus*, vol. iv: *Jewish Antiquities, Books i–iv* (The Loeb Classical Library, London 1961), 553.

By ‘Arabia’, no doubt, Josephus means Nabataea (i.e., what later became the Roman Province of Arabia), for he observes elsewhere that

these [twelve sons of Ishmael] occupied the whole country extending from the Euphrates to the Red Sea and called it Nabatēnē; and it is these who conferred their names on the Arabian nation and its tribes (*to tōn Arabōn ethnos kai tas phulas*) in honour both of their own prowess and of the name of Abraham.³⁵

He thus equates ‘Arabia’ with Nabataea.³⁶

Finally, Eusebius — who draws on Josephus — informs us that Petra ‘is called Rekem by the Assyrians’ (*Rekem para Assuriōis onomazetai*; in Jerome’s Latin translation, *a Syris Recem dicitur*).³⁷

Arabic Sources

The geographical compendium of Šihāb al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh Yāqūt ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī al-Rūmī al-Baghdādī (d. AH 626/1229 CE), *Muʿjam al-buldān*, is probably the most important and most famous medieval gazetteer compiled in Arabic. In his entry on al-Raqīm Yāqūt states,

in the vicinity of al-Balqā’ in the environs of al-Šām there is a place called al-Raqīm which some of them [scil., its inhabitants]³⁸ believe to be [the resting place of] the people of the cave (*wa-bi-qurb al-Balqā’ min aṭrāf al-Šām mawḍi’ un yuqālu lahu ’l-Raqīm yaz’amu ba’duhum anna bihi ahl al-kahf*).³⁹

It is evident from Yāqūt’s wording that he knew the place from outside the folktales surrounding the Quranic narrative. ‘There exists a

³⁵ *Ant.* 1:221; translation from *ibid.*, 109.

³⁶ For more on Josephus’ treatment of the ‘Arabs’, see F. Millar, ‘Hagar, Ishmael, Josephus, and the Origins of Islam’, in *idem*, *Rome, the Greek World, and the East*, vol. iii: *The Greek World, the Jews, and the East* (Chapel Hill 2006), 351–77 (originally published in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 44 [1993], 23–45).

³⁷ *Eusebii Pamphili episcopi Caesariensis Onomasticon: Urbium et locorum sacrae scripturae*, ed. F. Larsow and G. Parthey (Berlin 1862), 306–7, s.v. ‘Petra’ (see also entries ‘Arkem’ and ‘Rekem’).

³⁸ Yāqūt makes the antecedent of this ‘them’ clear in his entry for ‘Ammān: ‘it has been said that ‘Ammān is the city of Decius, and in its vicinity the cave and al-Raqīm are located, [which are] well-known among the people of that land’ (*wa-bi’l-qurb minhā al-kahf wa’l-Raqīm ma’rūfun ’inda ahl tilka ’l-bilād*); Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān* (Beirut 1397/1977), iv, 151.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, iii, 60, s.v. ‘al-Raqīm’.

place called al-Raqīm', he avers; the fact that *some* people, unsurprisingly, connected it to the story of the companions of the cave has no bearing on the reality of the town's existence. Yāqūt has no hesitation in giving us his own opinion concerning the location of the companions' city: 'but the truth is that their [resting place] lies in the Byzantine territory, as will be mentioned'⁴⁰ (*wa'l-ṣaḥīḥ annahum bi-bilād al-Rūm kammā nadkuruhu*).⁴¹ Yāqūt adds that Yazīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik (r. AH 101–5/720–4 CE) used to dwell in al-Raqīm. In respect of al-Balqā', Yāqūt says it is 'a district of Damascus (*kūratun min a'māl Dimašq*) between al-Šām and Wādī al-Qurā; its metropolis (*qaṣabatuhā*) being 'Ammān'.⁴²

According to Šams al-Dīn Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Maqdisī (d. after AH 380/990 CE), al-Raqīm is 'a town at a distance of one *farsah* from 'Ammān, on the fringes of the desert' (*'alā tuḥūm al-bādiya*). Al-Maqdisī appends to this entry a popular legend about a cave near this Raqīm in which three graves could be found.⁴³

Our last geographical source is the *Taqwīm al-buldān* of Abu'l-Fidā' Ismā'il ibn 'Alī (d. AH 732/1331 CE) — who is evidently reliant on Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Iṣṭaḥrī (fl. fourth century AH) for the first part of his entry. Abu'l-Fidā' reports,

al-Raqīm is one of the famous places of al-Šām, being a small town near al-Balqā' (*bulaydatun ṣaḡīratun bi-qurb al-Balqā'*). Its houses are entirely carved out of stone, as if it were a single piece of rock. Al-Balqā' is one of the districts (*kuwar*) of al-Šarāt... one day's journey (*marḥalatin*) from Jericho, and Jericho is to al-Balqā's west.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, i, 231, s.v. 'Ufsūs' (Ephesus), where he sounds less certain, modifying his statement by the verb *yūqāl*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, iii, 60.

⁴² *Ibid.*, i, 489, s.v. 'al-Balqā'. The historical region was greater than modern Balqā' province in the Kingdom of Jordan.

⁴³ Al-Maqdisī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fi ma'rifat al-aqālīm*, ed. M.J. de Goeje (Leiden 1906), 175.

⁴⁴ Abu'l-Fidā', *Taqwīm al-buldān*, ed. M. Reinaud and M. Mac Guckin de Slane (Paris 1840), 227–8; cf. al-Iṣṭaḥrī, *Masālik al-mamālik*, ed. M.J. de Goeje (Leiden 1927), 64. Based on these testimonies, Guy Le Strange placed Quranic Raqīm at a distance of three miles from Amman, noting that 'neither of these indications will allow of Ar Rakīm being identified with Petra (Wādī Mūsā) lying two days march south of the Dead Sea'; G. Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems: A Description of Syria and the Holy Land from A.D. 650 to 1500* (Beirut 1890), 277–8, footnote. Although he is well aware of the reference to two RQMs in rabbinic sources, he simply sides with his Arabic sources in identifying Quranic Raqīm with the one near Amman.

During Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī's and Nūr al-Dīn Zangī's abortive expedition against the crusader stronghold of al-Karak in AH 568/1172 CE, the latter is said to have departed from Damascus and encamped in al-Raqīm. According to Abu'l-Fidā's *al-Muḥtaṣar fī aḥbār al-baṣar*, al-Raqīm is 'near al-Karak'.⁴⁵ A contemporary of the event, Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn al-Aṭīr (d. AH 630/1233 CE), glosses al-Raqīm with the statement 'between it and al-Karak is two days' journey' (*marḥalatān*) in his account of the event.⁴⁶ Al-Raqīm once more crops up in Abū Ṣāma al-Maqdisī's (d. AH 665/1268 CE) account of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's second unsuccessful siege of al-Karak in AH 580/1184 CE.⁴⁷ This account — on the authority of 'Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (d. AH 597/1201 CE), a boon companion of the sultan's — is extremely invaluable inasmuch as it furnishes us with Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's precise itinerary in the region after leaving Damascus: 'the sultan departed from Ra's al-Mā'⁴⁸ by way of al-Ṣalīl,⁴⁹ al-Zarqā',⁵⁰ 'Ammān, and al-Balqā', then al-Raqīm, Zīzā',⁵¹ al-Nuqūb,⁵² and al-Lajjūn,⁵³ to Adir,⁵⁴ then al-Rabba,⁵⁵ which is

⁴⁵ Abu'l-Fidā', *al-Muḥtaṣar fī aḥbār al-baṣar* (Cairo 1325/1907), iii, 53.

⁴⁶ Ibn al-Aṭīr, *al-Kāmil fī'l-ta'rīḥ*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmūrī (Beirut 1417/1997), ix, 385.

⁴⁷ The fort eventually fell to Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in 1189 CE. For the history of southern Transjordan, and in particular al-Karak, in this period, see Marcus Milwright, *The Fortress of the Raven: Karak in the Middle Islamic Period (1100–1650)* (Leiden 2008), 25–42.

⁴⁸ Presumably the Ra's al-'Ayn near Damascus. Ibn al-Aṭīr, *Ta'rīḥ*, x, 161 and 169, places it in Ḥawrān in the southwest of modern-day Syria, near Damascus.

⁴⁹ Nowadays spelt al-Ḍalīl, to the northeast of Amman in the modern provinces of Zarqā' and Mafrāq.

⁵⁰ To the north of Amman.

⁵¹ In the south of Amman, in Amman province. Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, iii, 163, mentions it as a town in al-Balqā'.

⁵² Remains unidentified.

⁵³ Yāqūt only gives its approximate location as 'on the route to Mecca from al-Ṣām, near Taymā' (ibid., v, 14). The village is not far to the northeast of the modern city of Karak (not to be mistaken for the village of the same name in Palestine). It was called Betthorus in ancient times and was garrisoned by a Roman legion, Legio IV Martia (hence its Arabic name); D. Kennedy, *The Roman Army in Jordan* (London 2004), 154–9.

⁵⁴ A few kilometres northeast of al-Karak. It has been identified with Stephan of Byzantium's Adara; S.T. Parker et al., *The Roman Frontier in Central Jordan: Final Report on the Limes Arabicus Project, 1980–1989* (Washington 1992), 17.

⁵⁵ Known as Rabbat Moab in ancient times, currently in al-Karak province, not far from the provincial capital, al-Karak, and to its north, east of the Dead Sea. This sudden turn northwards must have been occasioned by tactical necessity, as pointed out by C. Clermont-Ganneau, 'El-Kahf et la caverne des sept dormants', *Comptes*

in the region of Moab', until he stationed himself in Wādī al-Karak.⁵⁶

As we can glean from these three historiographical sources, al-Raqīm was somewhere between Amman and al-Karak, that is to say, to the south of Amman. Karak itself lies about halfway from Petra to Amman.

It may be seen that the Raqīm of our Arabophone writers, being in the vicinity of Amman, could not be identified with Petra, which is over 200 kilometres' distance from the Jordanian capital. But what about the other RQM, the RQM of ḤGRH? Could this Raqīm be the same place as RQM d-ḤGRH?⁵⁷ While the evidence is less than decisive, one can make a case for such an identification.

The important rabbinic list of the border towns mentions RQM d-ḤGRH after Tarngōlā, near Caesarea Philippi, and before Trachonitis, — known as al-Lajāt since medieval times — near Bosra, and Ḥešbōn. Of these, Caesarea Philippi is situated to the north of the Sea of Galilee, near the triple point between the modern states of Israel, Lebanon, and Syria; Amman is to the southeast of the Sea of Galilee; al-Lajāt to its east; and Ḥešbōn to its south, to the northeast of the northern tip of the Dead Sea. Bar al-Lajāt, the rest form a clockwise itinerary around Jerusalem. Technically, if RQM d-ḤGRH was located somewhere near Amman, al-Lajāt should have been mentioned before it, but this is not a real problem given how corrupt most of the manuscripts are and that the order of the towns slightly varies in each witness.⁵⁸ The location of the other places of the list is

rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belle-Lettres 43 (1899), 564–76, p. 576.

⁵⁶ Abū Šāma, *ʿUyūn al-rawḍatayn fī aḥbār al-dawlatayn al-nūriyya wa'l-ṣalāhiyya*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Zībaq (Beirut 1418/1997), iii, 206.

⁵⁷ Some scholars have proposed that RQM d-ḤGRH is to be identified with Madā'in Šālīḥ in Saudi Arabia, but this claim has been ably debunked by Davies, 'Hagar, el-Heğra and the Location of Mount Sinai'. However, Davies' own alternative placement of it in Sinai is very unlikely.

⁵⁸ It may be worth drawing attention to a short entry in Yāqūt: under 'Ḥijrā', he states that 'it is one of the villages of Damascus' (*Mu'jam al-buldān*, ii, 224). This place may have been our Ḥegrā. It must also be pointed out that one of the oldest witnesses to this list, the inscription of Reḥōb, records the full name of this RQM as RQM Ṭrakōn, RQM of Trachonitis, but this does not seriously affect our analysis inasmuch as Trachonitis is not situated far from Damascus, and indeed not far from Amman either. In other words, RQM of Trachonitis could just be an alternative name for RQM of Ḥegrā. A translation of the inscription could be found in A. Houtman, M.J.H.M. Poothuis and J. Schwartz (eds), *Sanctity of Time and Space in Tradition and Modernity* (Leiden 1998), Appendix 1, 361–3.

not quite certain, but one imagines that after Ḥešbōn the rest of them must lie along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea and in a southerly direction. At the end of the list is RQM GY'H which, if identified with Petra, would mark the southernmost limit of Ereš Yisrā'el, just as one would expect.⁵⁹

We must now turn to the last piece of evidence from the medieval Arabo-Islamic tradition for the location of al-Raqīm, a brief report in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās. According to this tradition, 'al-Raqīm is a *wādī* between 'Uṣfān⁶⁰ and Ayla on the southern extremity of [lit., 'below'] Palestine, located near Ayla' (*al-Raqīm wādīn bayna 'Uṣfān wa-Ayla dūna Filastīn wa-huwa qarībun min Ayla*).⁶¹ But Petra, to the northeast of Ayla, — modern 'Aqaba — is not between Ayla and 'Uṣfān. The solution to this riddle must be sought in a variant of this tradition found in Abu'l-Baqā' Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Damīrī's *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān*, according to which 'al-Raqīm is a *wādī* between 'Ammān and Ayla on the southern extremity of Palestine.'⁶² This latter version lacks the final part of al-Ṭabarī's report which places al-Raqīm closer to Ayla, but, most

⁵⁹ The list is notoriously corrupt and the ordering and spelling of the names in it differ by version and even by manuscript; in some cases some places do not show up at all in one version and we may find the name of new places in their lieu. For the full roster and a discussion of the location of the places listed in it, see Freimark and Krämer *Die Tosefta*, 197–207, and the references therein (note 99); and V. Fritz, 'Die Grenzen des Landes Israel', in G. Galil and M. Weinfeld (eds), *Studies in Historical Geography and Biblical Historiography: Presented to Zecharia Kallai* (Leiden 2000), 14–34, pp. 27–32. However, this latter work is very uncritical in its approach and takes the targumic identification of the two RQMs for granted. I cannot agree with Retsö's far-fetched arguments in his 'Petra and Qadesh' either, mostly because at times he seems unwilling to concede that the biblical and late-ancient identifications of placenames do not necessarily match.

⁶⁰ According to Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, iv, 121–2, thirty-six miles to the north of Mecca and the northern limit of Tihāma. The town is still standing.

⁶¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, xv, 157–8.

⁶² Al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān al-kubrā*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥasan Basaj (Beirut 1424/2003), ii, 393. A variant in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Abu'l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo 1394/1974), iv, 87, gives the name of the town as 'Uqbān, otherwise unknown. Al-Zamahṣārī, *al-Kaššāf 'an ḥaqā'iq ḡawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta'wīl*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥusayn Aḥmad (Beirut 1407/1987), ii, 705, gives it as Ġaḍbān, which according to Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, iv, 206, is near Basra, but also a mount 'in the environs of al-Šām between which and Ayla' is the place of the companions of the cave (I am indebted to Andreas Ismail Mohr for drawing my attention to these latter two variants). This last bit of information, however, seems to be spurious and generated exactly by this last variant reported by al-Zamahṣārī. According to al-Ṭa'labī, *al-Kašf wa'l-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. Abū Muḥammad ibn 'Āšūr (Beirut 1422/2002), vi, 146, it is 'a *wādī* between [the

certainly, both are corrupt forms of an original which placed al-Raqīm between Amman and Ayla and closer to the latter.⁶³ The other two pieces of information supplied by this tradition tally with what we already know of Petra equally well: it is a *wādī* and, most significantly, it marks the southern boundary of Palestine according to the rabbinic list of the border towns of the Holy Land. We may, therefore, rest assured that al-Ṭabarī's Raqīm is indeed Petra,⁶⁴ thus adding another witness to our repertoire.⁶⁵

What remains to be explicated is the superfluous *yā'* in Raqīm. Given that no variant reading for this word has been recorded, one might safely assume that the Muslim tradition has faithfully preserved the orthography of the term and that, to judge by the Semitic form RQM, there existed an uncertainty as to its spelling. This ambiguity in the orthography shows that the town's name was almost certainly pronounced /raqēmō/⁶⁶ in Nabataean Aramaic, since /ē/ could be represented both with and without a mater lectionis in Aramaic.⁶⁷

Rival Traditions?

But where was Quranic Raqīm, Petra or the village near Amman? In 1732, Albert Schultens produced an edition and Latin translation of

residence of the tribe of Gaṭafān and Ayla'. All of these seem to be corruptions of one and the same tradition, the one that locates al-Raqīm between Ayla and Amman.

⁶³ It is about 250 kilometres from Amman and 100 kilometres from 'Aqaba.

⁶⁴ Again, it must be emphasised that I am not taking the facticity of the claim that Quranic Raqīm is situated in southern Palestine at face value; rather, I am working on the assumption that these sorts of reports are extrapolations of the traditionists based on their knowledge of the existence of actual places called al-Raqīm, since these evidently objective reports do not seem to serve some ulterior theological or otherwise tendentious motive.

⁶⁵ For an overview of the various localisations of the city of the seven sleepers in the Muslim tradition, see M. Huber, *Die Wanderlegende von den Siebenschläfern: Eine literargeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Leipzig 1910), 222–40, appended to which is a survey of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship on the subject; and G.S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* (London 2010), 170–9.

⁶⁶ The final *wāw* in Nabataean Aramaic was probably realised as /ō/, as the evidence of Greek transcriptions of Nabataean names and Nabataean inscriptions transcribed in Greek indicates; A. Al-Jallad, 'Graeco-Arabica', in G. Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford 2015), 422–33, p. 426, and note 245 thereto; and c.f. idem, 'Graeco-Arabica I: The Southern Levant', in idem (ed.) *Arabic in Context: Celebrating 400 Years of Arabic at Leiden University* (Leiden 2017), 99–186, pp. 111, 179.

⁶⁷ E. Lipiński, *Semitic Languages: Outline of a Comparative Grammar* (Leuven 1997), 161.

Ibn Šaddād's *al-Nawādir al-sulṭāniyya wa'l-maḥāsin al-yūsufiyya* or *Sīrat Šalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī*, to which was appended relevant excerpts from other sources, including the passage from Abu'l-Fidā's *al-Muḥtaṣar* cited earlier. In the book's geographical index, Schultens suggested that this Raqīm was the same place as Petra.⁶⁸ Later, in the nineteenth century, Edward Robinson argued against this identification, pointing out, among other things, that Abu'l-Fidā's Raqīm lay to the north of al-Karak, far from the location of Wādī Mūsā.⁶⁹ Nineteenth-century Oriental studies thenceforth sided with Robinson in locating this Raqīm around Amman and even took the further step of equating it with the Quranic *raqīm*.⁷⁰ Scholarship has since veered away from this consensus,⁷¹ presumably because, from the point of view of most scholars, a small village near Amman is unlikely to have had any special significance for the inhabitants of the central Ḥijāz in Late Antiquity.⁷² However, the same could not be said of Petra.

While by the turn of the millennium Petra's ancient glory had long been forgotten,⁷³ in the early seventh century it still was a city of

⁶⁸ A. Schultens, *Vita et res gestae sultani Almalichi Alnasiri Saladini Abi Modaffiri Josephi F. Jobi F. Sjadsī* (1732), index geographicus, s.v. 'Errakimum'.

⁶⁹ E. Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and Adjacent Regions: A Journal of Travels in the Years 1838 and 1852* (London 1856), vol. ii, 521–4, note xxxvii.

⁷⁰ Cf. Clermont-Ganneau, 'El-Kahf et la caverne', 571; and Le Strange's opinion cited in note 44 *supra*.

⁷¹ Cf., for instance, Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart 2005), 318; Griffith, 'Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān', 125–7.

⁷² Arthur Jeffery, however, is the only scholar to have proposed a relationship between *raqīm* and RQM d-G'Y' in particular, identified by him as the Raqīm of the Muslim geographers; Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda 1938), 144. I should also do justice to twentieth-century Oriental scholarship on the Qur'ān by mentioning the Iranian intellectual Kāzīm Bargnīsī who, in a review essay of the Persian translation of Jeffery's book, passingly proposed that *al-raqīm* is to be identified with Petra; see his 'Wāza-hā-yi daḥīl-i Qur'ān wa dīdgāh-hā', *Ma'ārif* 12 (1374 SH/1995 CE), 93–119, pp. 114–15 (I am grateful to Majid Montazermahdi for bringing this essay to my attention).

⁷³ In my cursory survey of the Muslim sources I have only come across it in three places: in Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, i, 335, who only knows of it as the place where the Prophet had alighted for offering prayers in his expedition to Tabūk; in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīḥ al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abu'l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo 1387/1967), ii, 595, who mentions it in the account of the Prophet's expedition against the Banū Liḥyān (which, if the rest of the account's details are reliable, could not have been the case); and in the account of the battle of the Ḥarra in Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsin wa'l-masāwī*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abu'l-Faḍl (Cairo 1380/1961), i, 60 (the edition mistakenly has 'al-Baṭrā').

some local significance with a small population.⁷⁴ On the other hand, the context of the Qur'ān's presentation of its own 'true' version of the tale shows that competing versions of it were in circulation at the time, as is evident from verse 22 of the *sūra*: 'some would say [they were] three, their fourth being their dog; some say [they were] five, their sixth being their dog, hazarding a guess; some say seven, their eighth being their dog. Say: my Lord is best informed of their number; none knows them but few' (*mā ya'lamuhum illā qalīlun*). The sectarian background to these rival traditions may be surmised from vv. 4–5 (cf. also v. 12): 'so as to warn those who say God has adopted (*ittahada*) a son' (v. 4).⁷⁵ In this 'sectarian milieu', it seems, the Qur'ān has opted for an Arabian version of the story,⁷⁶ a version adorned with trappings of 'orthodoxy'.⁷⁷ This Arabian version had to champion an Arabian city as the abode of its heroes, and Petra, founded by the sons of Ishmael, was the Arabian city *par excellence*.⁷⁸

Address for correspondence: mehdyshaddel@gmail.com

⁷⁴ See, e.g., L. Koenen, 'The Carbonized Archive from Petra', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 9 (1996), 177–88; M. Nasarat, F. Abudanh and S. Naimat, 'Agriculture in Sixth-Century Petra and its Hinterland: The Evidence from the Papyri', *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 23 (2012), 105–15.

⁷⁵ Thus Griffith, 'Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān', 117–18; recapitulated more forcefully by Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext*, 184–5, who is, however, somewhat overly preoccupied with the alleged Syriac Christian 'subtext' of the story.

⁷⁶ And it is, in all likelihood, the Qur'ān's anxiousness to assert the 'authenticity' of this version that lies behind the somewhat peculiar use of two genitives in an *idāfa*, *aṣḥāba 'l-kahf wa'l-Raqīmi*. *Wa'l-Raqīm* here somehow modifies *al-kahf*, putting stress on the purported Petraean origin of the protagonists and, thereby, the Petra-centred version of the story.

⁷⁷ Cf. the assertion that the companions 'do not have any protector (*wali*) other than Him and none shares in His rule' (v. 26), apparently a polemic against those Trinitarian Christians who laid a claim to them. And, I think, the same could be said of the Qur'ān's emphasis on the uncompromising strictness of their monolatry (cf. vv. 14–16).

⁷⁸ Presumably in the absence of a local tradition connecting the companions with Mecca or, for that matter, anywhere else in western Arabia.