STUDIA ONOMASTICA CORANICA: 
AL-RAQĪM, CAPUT NABATAEAE*

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بار پر چین شودت روی و بخندی بفسوس
چون بخوانم ز قرآن قسه أصحاب رقیم

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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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

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

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 āyātinā ʽajaban, ‘do you reckon the companions of the cave and of al-raqīm to be among Our wondrous signs?’*

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. 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’. Third, that *al-raqīm* was the name of the cave (or the mountain) in which the ‘youths’ took refuge. And fourth, that *al-raqīm* refers to the inscription in which the names of these youths were recorded. 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 times and seems to have found favour with modern scholarship as well. According to the fifth

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

4 Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʽan ta’wīl al-qur’ān*, 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 tafsīr 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).


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

interpretation, *al-raqiim* 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-raqiim*. Assuming that the *textus receptus* has been preserved faithfully at this place, we can see that *al-raqiim* 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

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\(^{10}\) Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manṯūr*, 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 Ahmad Muḥṭār ‘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-Ḫaṭīb, *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-balāġa*; and in a *ḥadīṯ* cited by Ibn Manẓūr in his *Liṣān 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-raqimin mā'irin*) — it must be borne in mind that the adjective *mā'ir* is almost always used of the substantive ‘arrow’; Ibn Manẓūr, *Liṣān al-‘Arab*, s.v. *m-w-r*; al-Fīrūzābādī, *al-qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, 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-ṣufūf ḥattā yada‘ahā mišl al-qidh aw al-raqiim*). 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 triliteral radical, whilst elsewhere it uses the expected *mafiʿil* form to designate something ‘written’ or ‘inscribed’ (Qur’ān 83:9, which speaks of a ‘written book’, *kitāb marqūm*).\(^\text{13}\) 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 (*fāʿil*), used as a substantive adjective (*faʿil*), has been imported into Arabic diction to produce the anomalous *al-raqiʿm*, presumably originally by an Arabic-speaking Christian with a Syriac-speaking background.’\(^\text{14}\) 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 Sarūq’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-raqiʿm* 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 meaning\(^\text{15}\) 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-raqiʿm* 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-Raqim; however, these entries

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\(^\text{13}\) *Contra* Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 95, who adduces this latter verse in support of the inscription interpretation!


\(^\text{15}\) 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 taṣfīr 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.\(^\text{16}\) The first-century epitaph, discovered at the entrance to the Siq leading to the archaeological site of Petra, near modern-day Wādī Mūṣā, reads as follows:

\[
d' \text{nḥṣ p̣ṭryś br / trptṣ ẉqr ſy / hwḥ brqmw dy myt / bgrśw ẉqbyr ṭmh dy / 'bd [']lh ̣ \text{tymw rbnḥ}
\]

This is the funerary monument of PTRYS, son of TRPTS, the honoured one who was in RQMW, who died in GRŚW and was buried there, [and] who was a servant of the god of TYMW, his lord.\(^\text{18}\)


\(^\text{17}\) The text as given by Starcky here reads ḫb. However, I have inserted an Ḃṣāp 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.

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
\textit{npš}) 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 com-
monly encountered in Nabataean inscriptions – with or without ref-
erence to the name of the deity him/herself.\footnote{J.F. Healey, \textit{The Religion of the Nabataeans: a Conspectus} (Leiden 2001),
151–2.} In some cases, the
person mentioned is the king, with the inscription reading ‘the god
of our lord (\textit{lh mn n’}), so-and-so’\footnote{Ibid., 154.}. 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 \textit{wāw} of RQMW is a peculiarity
observed in some substantives in Nabataean Aramaic.\footnote{F. de Blois, ‘Who is King amaro?’ \textit{Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy} 6 (1995), 196–8, p. 198 (n. 8); see also the references in note 66 infra.}

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 Sebast-
ian 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,\footnote{On this event, now see D.B. Levenson, ‘The Palestinian Earthquake of May 363 in Philostorgius, the Syriac \textit{Chronicon miscellaneum}, and the Letter Attributed to Cyril on the Rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple’, \textit{Journal of Late Antiquity} 6 (2013), 60–83.} in which many cities of Palestine and
Province Arabia were partially or totally destroyed, including ‘more
with Petra in his translation.\footnote{Brock, ‘Letter Attributed to Cyril’, 276.}

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 \textit{Vita of Barṣawmā} (d. c. 456 CE),

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item J.F. Healey, \textit{The Religion of the Nabataeans: a Conspectus} (Leiden 2001), 151–2.
\item Ibid., 154.
\item F. de Blois, ‘Who is King amaro?’ \textit{Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy} 6 (1995), 196–8, p. 198 (n. 8); see also the references in note 66 infra.
\item Brock, ‘Letter Attributed to Cyril’, 276.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
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’.

RQM d-G’Y’ seems to be the full name of Petra to distinguish it from another RQM, RQM d-HGRH. 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-HGRH with Qādeš Barnē’a.28 RQM G’Y’ (along with RQM d-HGRH) shows up in a late-ancient list of the border towns of Ereṣ Yisrā’el. This list begins with Ashkelon, thence moves northwards, then eastwards, southwards, and thence back to Ashkelon. The final part reads, ‘Upper Tānrqolā above Caesarea [Philippi], Bēt SWKT, and RQM d-HGRH, Trachonitis, which is in the district of Bosra, Ḥešbōn, Yabbōq, the brook-valley of Zered and Ygar SKWTH, Nimrīn, MLH d-ZR’W’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


26 Variously spelt G’Y’, GY’, and GY’H.


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: Demat – Schebiit (Stuttgart 1971), 197–207. I will get back to this gazetteer in due course.

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‘(prṭ’ medyt’ dmtny’ blš’n’ dbyt nhryn rqm dgy’). 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 Bardaiṣān 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.

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 (hōu 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).

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 prṭ’.


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 Assurios onomazetai; in Jerome’s Latin translation, a Syris Recem dicitur).\(^{37}\)

### Arabic Sources

The geographical compendium of Šihāb al-Dīn Abū ‘Abbās Allāh Yaqūt ibn ‘Abbās Allāh al-Ḥamawī al-Rūmī al-Baġdādī (d. AH 626/1229 CE), Mu’jam al-buldān, is probably the most important and most famous medieval gazetteer compiled in Arabic. In his entry on al-Raqīm Yaqūt 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] 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’dhum anna bihi abl al-kahf).\(^{39}\)

It is evident from Yaqūt’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.


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

\(^{38}\) Yaqūt 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 mawḍi‘un lahu ‘l-Raqīm ma‘rūfun ‘inda ahl tilka ‘l-bilād); Yaqūt, Mu‘jam 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-bīlād al-Rūm kammā nadkuruḥu).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 (kiyāratun min a’māl Dimāṣq) between al-Šām and Wādī al-Qurā; its metropolis (qasabatuḥā) being ‘Ammān’.42

According to Šams al-Dīn Abū ‘abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ahmad al-Maqdisī (d. after AH 380/990 CE), al-Raqīm is ‘a town at a distance of one farsāh 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 Abū’l-Fidā’ ʿIsā’ī ibn ‘Alī (d. AH 732/1331 CE) — who is evidently reliant on Abū Ishaq ʿIbrāhīm 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 ṣaġīratun 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. ‘Ufṣūs’ (Ephesus), where he sounds less certain, modifying his statement by the verb yuqāl.
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.
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 Rakîm being identified with Petra (Wādī Mūṣā) 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 Salāḥ 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’ī’s al-Muḥtaṣar fi ṣī ḥaṭḥūr al-baṣār, al-Raqīm is ‘near al-Karak’. A contemporary of the event, Abu’l-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn al-Aṯīr (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. Al-Raqīm once more crops up in Abū Šāma al-Maqdisī’s (d. AH 665/1268 CE) account of Salāḥ al-Dīn’s second unsuccessful siege of al-Karak in AH 580/1184 CE. This account — on the authority of ʿImād al-Dīn al-İṣfahānī (d. AH 597/1201 CE), a boon companion of the sultan’s — is extremely invaluable inasmuch as it furnishes us with Salāḥ al-Dīn’s precise itinerary in the region after leaving Damascus: ‘the sultan departed from Ra’s al-Maʿ48 by way of al-Zalīl,49 al-Zarqa’,50 ‘Ammān, and al-Balqā’, then al-Raqīm, Zīzā’,51 al-Nuqūb,52 and al-Lajjūn,53 to Adīr,54 then al-Rabba,55 which is

45 Abu’l-Fidā’, al-Muḥtaṣar fi ṣī ḥaṭḥūr al-baṣār (Cairo 1325/1907), iii, 53.
47 The fort eventually fell to Salāḥ 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-ʿAyn near Damascus. Ibn al-Aṯīr, Ta’rīḥ, x, 161 and 169, places it in Hawrān in the southwest of modern-day Syria, near Damascus.
49 Nowadays spelt al-Dalīl, to the northeast of Amman in the modern provinces of Zarqa and Mafraq.
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-Šām, 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 Bethethrus 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.
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

313
in the region of Moab’, until he stationed himself in Wādī al-Karak.56

As we can glean from these three historiographical sources, al-Raqîm 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 Raqîm 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 Raqîm be the same place as RQM d-HGRH?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-HGRH after Tarngōlā, near Caesarea Philippi, and before Trachonitis, — known as al-Lajāt since medieval times — near Bosra, and Hešbôn. 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 Hešbôn 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-HGRH 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...
not quite certain, but one imagines that after Hešbôn 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 Erey Yisrâ’el, just as one would expect.

We must now turn to the last piece of evidence from the medieval Arabo-Islamic tradition for the location of al-Raqîm, a brief report in al-Ṭabarî’s *tafsîr* on the authority of Ibn ʽAbbâs. According to this tradition, ‘al-Raqîm is a *wâdi* between ‘Usfân and Ayla on the southern extremity of [lit., ‘below’] Palestine, located near Ayla’ (al-Raqîm wâdin bayna ‘Usfân wa-Ayla dûna Filastîn wa-huwa qarîbun min Ayla). But Petra, to the northeast of Ayla, — modern ‘Aqaba — is not between Ayla and ‘Usfân. The solution to this riddle must be sought in a variant of this tradition found in Abu’l-Baqâ’ Muḥammad ibn Mûsâ al-Damîrî’s *Hayât al-Ḥayawān*, according to which ‘al-Raqîm is a *wâdi* between ‘Ammân and Ayla on the southern extremity of Palestine.’ This latter version lacks the final part of al-Ṭabarî’s report which places al-Raqîm 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. Galîl 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 Retso’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 Yaqût, *Mujam al-buldân*, iv, 121–2, thirty-six miles to the north of Mecca and the northern limit of Tihâma. The town is still standing.


62 Al-Damîrî, *Hayât al-Ḥayawān al-kubrâ*, ed. Ahmad Ḥasan Basaj (Beirut 1424/2003), ii, 393. A variant in al-Suyûṭî, *al-Iṣâqān fi ‘ulûm al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muhammad Abu’l-Fadl Ibrâhîm (Cairo 1394/1974), iv, 87, gives the name of the town as ‘Uqâbân, otherwise unknown. Al-Zamaḫšarî, *al-Kaššāf ‘an ḥaqîq ġawâmiḍ al-tanzîl wa-‘uyûn al-aqâwîl fî wujûh al-tawîl*, ed. Muṣṭafá Ḥusayn Ahmad (Beirut 1407/1987), ii, 705, gives it as Ga’dbân, which according to Yaqût, *Mujam al-buldân*, iv, 206, is near Basra, but also a mount ‘in the environs of al-Šâm 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-Zamaḫšarî. According to al-Ṭa‘labî, *al-Kašf wa l-bayān ‘an tafsîr al-Qur’ān*, ed. Abû Muhammad ibn ‘Âṣûr (Beirut 1422/2002), vi, 146, it is ‘a *wâdi* between [the
certainly, both are corrupt forms of an original which placed al-Raqīm between Amman and Ayla and closer to the latter. The other two pieces of information supplied by this tradition tally with what we already know of Petra equally well: it is a wādi 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, thus adding another witness to our repertoire.

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 /raqēm/ in Nabataean Aramaic, since /ē/ could be represented both with and without a mater lectionis in Aramaic.

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 Ġaṭafān 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. It is about 250 kilometres from Amman and 100 kilometres from ‘Aqaba.

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.


Ibn Šaddād’s *al-Nawādir al-sulṭāniyya wa’l-mahāsin al-yūsufiyya* or *Sīrat Šalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyābī*, to which was appended relevant excerpts from other sources, including the passage from Abu’l-Fidā’ 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 Hijāz 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

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68 A. Schultens, *Vita et res gestae sultani Almalichi Alnasiri Saladini Abi Modaffiri Josephi F. Jobi F. Sjädti* (1732), index geographicus, s.v. ‘Errakimum’.  
70 Cf. Clermont-Ganneau, ‘El-Kahf et la caverne’, 571; and Le Strange’s opinion cited in note 44 supra.  
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 Kāẓim 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 ‘Wāţā-hā-yi dahl-i Qur’ān wa didgā-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, *Taʿrīḫ al-rusul wa’l-mulūk*, ed. Muhammad Abu’l-Fadl Ibrahim (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 Ibrahim ibn Muhammad al-Bayhaqi, *al-Mahāsin wa’l-masāwī*, ed. Muhammad Ibrahim Abu’l-Fadl (Cairo 1380/1961), i, 60 (the edition mistakenly has ‘al-Batrī’).
some local significance with a small population. 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 (ittaḥada) a son’ (v. 4). In this ‘sectarian milieu’, it seems, the Qur’ān has opted for an Arabian version of the story, a version adorned with trappings of ‘orthodoxy’. 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.

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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 iḍāfa, ašḥāba ‘l-kahfi 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 (wāli) 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.