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# ʿAbd al-Asad and the Question of a Lion-God in the pre-Islamic Tradition: An Onomastic Study

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# ʿAbd al-Asad and the Question of a Lion-God in the pre-Islamic Tradition: An Onomastic Study

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## Abstract

This article investigates the pre-Islamic name ʿAbd al-Asad and the alleged lion-god in the Arabic tradition through the onomastic evidence of two ancient Semitic languages (Eblaite and Amorite) as well as the ancient epigraphic languages of Arabia. The study suggests that the name has no association with the god Yaġūt under the form of a lion. Alternatively, it reflects either an ‘archaic’ astral cult related to Leo or a traditional name-giving practice known especially in the northern parts of the Arabian Peninsula. According to this practice, the individual, whether being a child or an adult, could have been named ʿAbd-of-X after the person who took care of him (i.e. a patron) or the tribe he belonged to.

**Keywords:** animal names, onomastics, ancestor cult, namegiving

## 1 Introduction

The personal name ʿAbd al-Asad, lit. “Servant of the Lion”,<sup>1</sup> was connected to a lion cult by Smith (1907: 224). It is worth quoting the relevant passage in full:

According to Zamakhsharī on Sur. 71 23, the Arabs worshipped their god Yaghūth under the form of a lion; and the existence of a lion-god is independently proved by the name ʿAbd al-Asad among the Coraish. That the Coraish worshipped Yaghuth we know from the names ʿAbd Yaghūth and ʿObaid Yaghūth.

Nöldeke (1913: 662) is more cautious about this hypothesis:

In the case of the Lion-god, whose existence is proved only by the mention of a man named ʿAbd al-Asad, ‘servant of the Lion’, belonging to the tribe of Quraish, such a supposition would be especially hazardous, since *asad* is a comparatively modern word for ‘lion’, not the old word common to the various Semitic languages.

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<sup>1</sup>Two pre-Islamic individuals bore this name: ʿAbd al-Asad b. Hilāl and ʿAbd al-Asad b. ʿĀmir (Caskel 1966 2: 122), but more information is available on the former in the narrative sources.

Since this discussion, nothing has been written on the name ‘Abd al-Asad and the alleged lion-god. In my approach of this topic, I will first examine the element *\*’aš/ś(a)d-* in the ancient Semitic languages and then discuss Classical Arabic theophoric names containing ‘*Abd*’ as the first element in light of the Ancient Arabian onomasticon and the classical narrative sources.

## 2 The question of *\*’aš/ś(a)d-*

This element appears as an appellative and as a divine name in two Eblaite names: Ašda-Il “Il is A.” and Ḥinna-’ašda “Have mercy, A.”, where it is translated as “lion” in view of Arabic *asad-* (Pagan 1998: 324; Krebernik 1988: 76). The element is much more common, however, in the Amorite onomasticon (Gelb 1982: 52, sub ’AŠD), e.g. Ašda-aḥī “My brother is A.”, Ašdum-abī “My father is A.”, Ašdu-rābi or rāpi “A is great” or “healer”, and so on. Both Gelb (1982: 13) and Millet Albà (2000: 480f) adopt the same meaning, “lion”. Other scholars, on the other hand, suggest “warrior” (Huffmon 1965: 169; Durand 1991: 82 fn. 4; Streck 2000: §5.7) in view of Old Sabaic *’s<sup>1</sup>d* “men, soldiers, warriors” (Beeston et al. 1982: 7). As for the Ancient Arabian onomasticon, *’s<sup>1</sup>d* occurs as a theophoric element only in Old Sabaic<sup>2</sup> and as a one-word name in the other languages/scripts.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the element is attested as a deity’s name in a Nabataean inscription from Dēr el-Mešqūq *’šdw ’lhy ’lh m’ynw* “Aš(a)dū is (my) god, the god of Ma’inū” (mentioned by Cantineau 1932: 68a). The particular association between the deity and *m’ynw* here seems to point to a Minaean community in the Nabataean realm and consequently to a South Arabian cult regarding the same divine element found in Old Sabaic. This inscription thus cannot be taken as proof of a lion-god.

The earliest occurrence of *’s<sup>1</sup>d* as a name of the animal is in the Safaitic inscriptions, where it is attested some twenty times in the OCIANA corpus. For example:

- By Flṭt son of Tm son of Flṭt son of {Bhs<sup>2</sup>} son of ’dnt and he camped on the edge of an area of sand, then the lion injured him, so, O Lt, let there be security (Al-Jallad 2015: 266).
- By S<sup>1</sup>l is the lion (*’s<sup>1</sup>d*); a rock drawing of a lion accompanies this inscription (Ababneh 2005 inscr. #121).

<sup>2</sup>*’s<sup>1</sup>d’mn* “The (divine) warrior has given trust” (i.e. to the name-giver), *’s<sup>1</sup>dḏkr* “The (divine) warrior has mentioned” (i.e. the name), *’s<sup>1</sup>dkrb* “The (divine) warrior has recognized” (Tairan 1992: 61–64).

<sup>3</sup>Nabataean *’šdw* (Negev 1991: 165); Palmyrene *’šd*, *’šdw* (Stark 1971: 73); Safaitic *’s<sup>1</sup>d*, *’s<sup>1</sup>d*, *’s<sup>1</sup>dw*, *’s<sup>1</sup>dy*, *’s<sup>1</sup>dn*; *’s<sup>1</sup>d* in Dadanitic and Thamudic (Harding 1971: 7, 43); *’s<sup>1</sup>dt* as a masculine name in Thamudic, Minaic, Qatabanic, and as a feminine name in Sabaic (Shatnawi 2002: 646; Schaffer 1981: 296).



Figure 1: Tracing of inscription #121 by M. Ababneh

In view of this analysis, it seems likely that the sense “warrior” is secondary and that Arabic preserved the original meaning. The sense “warrior” could have emerged from a legend in which a king, an eponymous ancestor, or the like was associated with the lion. Over time, probably, the epithet replaced the concrete term and became a theophoric element with a particular reference to a class of ‘divine’ warriors. This proposition can be supported by the fact that other animal names in Semitic languages are used as designations of leaders, nobles, and warriors.<sup>4</sup> One could also assume that the Eblaite and Amorite names belong to an astral myth, in which Leo, as a deity, plays a heroic role. This might be reflected by two Amorite names formed with *maṭar*- “rain” (Aśdī-maṭar) and  $\sqrt{y-p}$ - “to irradiate” (Aśdī-ēpuḥ < *yapu*). The rain and irradiation are two characteristics of *naw’ al-asad* “Leo” in Arabic (Ibn Qutayba 1988: 53f). As a constellation name,  $h^2s^1d/{}^2s^1d$  is early recorded in Safaitic inscriptions (Al-Jallad 2014: 227a).

Given this information, is the element *al-Asad* in the pre-Islamic name ‘Abd al-Asad used as a divine epithet? Does it indicate Leo? Or does it belong to a different naming tradition? I will try to answer these questions in the following two sections.

### 3 Al-Asad: a divine epithet?

The hypothesis that this element denotes Yağūt (see the introduction) or an anonymous god seems less likely for two reasons:

First, classical Arab scholars who dealt with onomastica from an etymological point of view, such as Ibn Durayd (1991: 401), or wrote on the religion of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic times, such as Ibn al-Kalbī (1995: 10, 57), are silent on the association between Yağūt and the lion. In addition, a certain ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Asad was a companion of the Prophet (Ibn al-Aṭīr 1996 4: 170; 3: 506), and the latter is reported to have changed many names that do not agree with the Islamic instructions, especially the ones referring to idols (Kister 1975), but there is no Hadith concerning the name of ‘Abd al-Asad or the cult of Yağūt in the form of a lion, even though the idol is mentioned in the Qur’an (71: 23).

Second, as far as we know from the classical narrative sources, animal names do not occur as divine names/epithets in Arabic. In this context, one should be careful in dealing with the deity Nasr (Qur’an 71: 23), for it occurs

<sup>4</sup>For some examples in Ugaritic and Hebrew, see Miller (1970). As for Arabic, in the Najdi dialect, for instance, the term *tays/tēs* “he-goat” is an honorific title for elite persons (Hess 1912: 13).

as early as the Hatrene and Ancient South Arabian inscriptions.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4 ‘Abd al-Asad and names of the ‘Abd-X type

An examination of the onomastic evidence in Caskel (1966 2: 103-134) suggests that the pre-Islamic names of the ‘Abd-X type “Servant of X” are formed with the following elements:

1. a name of a deity: Allāh, Manāt (f), Dū-Šarā, al-‘Uzzā (f), Manāf, al-Dār, Ġadd, al-Qays, and so on;
2. divine beings: al-Ġān and al-Ġinn;<sup>6</sup>
3. a name of a sanctuary: al-Ka‘ba, al-Bayt, and al-Dār;
4. a kinship term: ‘Abd ‘ammih “Servant of his paternal uncle” or “ancestor” and ‘Abd ahlih “Servant of his family/clan” (the latter might figuratively denote a deity, Littmann 1948–1949: 52);
5. a name of a celestial body: ‘Abd Šams “Sun” (also Safaitic *‘bdšms*, Harding 1971: 399), ‘Abd al-Ṭurayyā “Pleiades”, and, possibly, ‘Abd Ṭābir, provided that it is related to Safaitic *tbr* “Sagittarius” (Al-Jallad 2014: 227);
6. personal names: ‘Adī, ‘Amr, ‘Āmir, al-Aswad, ‘Awf, al-Aws, al-Ašhal, Bakr, al-Ḥārīt, Ka‘b, ‘Umayya, al-Nu‘mān, Ġadīma, Ġarīš, Ġaṭafān, Hind, Yazīd, etc.

In view of the three names in group 5, it is possible that ‘Abd al-Asad refers to Leo and consequently indicates an ‘archaic’ astral cult.<sup>7</sup> If our interpretation of the element *as(a)d-* in the Eblaite and Amorite names is correct, i.e. Leo, the pre-Islamic name could represent a continuation of this tradition.

Alternatively, one can also approach the name through group no. 6, which deserves a thorough discussion. It has been assumed that some names in this group, like al-Ḥārīt, al-Ašhal, etc. were originally names of archaic idols, but they later subsequently became names with the widest circulation (Kister 1975: 7). However, Ibn al-Kalbī himself (1995: 30) is not certain whether names like ‘Abd Yālīl/Ġanm/Kulāl are based on idols or not, since there is no information on them in the older reports. In order to understand the names in group 6 and subsequently ‘Abd al-Asad, I will first consult the ancient Arabian evidence.

As is known, some names of the ‘Abd-X type are *basileophoric*, i.e. the divine element is replaced by that of a Nabataean monarch, e.g. *‘bdhrtt/‘bdhrtt* “Servant of Aretas”, *‘bd‘bdt* and its parallel *tym‘bdt/tm‘bdt*, meaning “Servant

<sup>5</sup>Nasr is used as a theophoric element in Sabaic, e.g. *rbns<sup>1</sup>rm* “N. is the god/great” and Qatabanic, e.g. *šfms<sup>1</sup>r* (f) “N. has looked down at me/us” (Sholan 1999: 148f). It is more observed, however, in the Hatrene onomasticon in the Aramaic form *Nešrā: brnšr* “Son of N.”, *‘bdnšr* “Servant of N.”, *nšryhb* “N. has given”, *nšr‘qb* “N. has protected”, *nšrltb* “May N. do well”, *nšmtn* “N. has given” (Beyer 1998: 149, sub *nešrā*).

<sup>6</sup>These seem to be related to Dura Αβιγγιναίος, likely transcription of *‘bdgny* “Servant of Ginnai”, and its semantic parallel Βαργιναίος *brgny* “Son of Ginnai” (Aramaic), where Gny/Ginnai is a deity known from Palmyra (Grassi 2012: 117, 161–162).

<sup>7</sup>For more information on astral cult, see Montgomery (2006: 91ff).

of Obodas”, *bdmlkw/bdmk* “Servant of Malichos”, *bdhldw* “Servant of (the queen) Ḥuldū”, *bds<sup>2</sup>qlt* “Servant of (the queen) Šaqīlat”, and *bdrb<sup>l</sup>* “Servant of Rabbēl” (Milik 1976: 145-146; King 1990: 76; Al-Jallad 2015: 59). This type of *basileophoric* names reflects an ancient Near Eastern onomastic tradition (without the element ‘*abd-*’)<sup>8</sup> and seems to have survived in the pre-Islamic ‘Abd al-Nu‘mān, ‘Abd Ġaḍīma, and ‘Abd al-Aswad,<sup>9</sup> which are mostly based on names of Lakhmid rulers.<sup>10</sup> Yet, there are some Nabataean names which are formed neither with a monarch’s name nor with a divinity’s, i.e. *bdmnrw*, *bd<sup>c</sup>d-nwn*, *bd<sup>c</sup>mrw*, *bd<sup>c</sup>mrw*. For Milik (1959–1960: 150) these are based on names of tribal eponyms. This hypothesis seems probable, especially that two of them, *mrw* and *mrw*, are attested as tribal names in Safaitic inscriptions in the forms *mn* and *mrt* (Al-Jallad 2015: Index of Tribes). This type of ‘Abd + tribe name might also apply to the pre-Islamic ‘Abd Ġaṭafān and ‘Abd al-Aws, whose second elements are found as both tribal and individual names (Caskel 1966 2: 123–124).

The last Ancient North Arabian group of the ‘Abd-X type is unclear, like Hismaic *bdgns<sup>l</sup>*, *bdqn*, and *bdhwr*, with the possibility that the latter refers to either a star (the third star [ε] of the tail of Ursa Major, next to the body) or the toponym *ḥwrw<sup>2</sup>* and *ḥwrwy* (King 1990: 77). If the latter hypothesis is correct, the toponym can be interpreted as an originally tribal name or a ‘cultic’ place.

I would also hypothesize that some of the unidentified Ancient North Arabian and pre-Islamic names of the ‘Abd-X type (group no. 6) reflect a kind of ancestor cult in the broad sense, including the ones based on eponyms and tribal names. This hypothesis is based on the fact that the Semitic onomastic traditions represent a kind of continuity. In modern Shiite names, for example, the element ‘*abd-*’ is added to one of the Shiite Imams’ names: ‘Abd ‘Alī/al-Ḥasan/al-Ḥusayn/al-‘Abbās/al-A‘imma (i.e. imams), and even ‘Abd al-Zahrā’ (i.e. the nickname of Fāṭīma, the Prophet’s daughter) (Al-Sāmīrā’ī 1983: 266). These imams in the Shiite creed are simply ancestors with an exalted position. Such a naming tradition would seem to have roots in an older Arabic tradition in particular and finds parallels in other Semitic cultures as well. For example, Old Babylonian names compounded with names of mortals or masters: Amat-Bēltani “Slave-girl of Bēltani”, Awīl-ilim-erībam “Awīl-ilim restituted to me”, and Ea-tukulti-qarrād, “Ea-tukulti is a hero”. Bēltani, Awīl-ilim, and Ea-tukulti are normal names but here they appear as if they had a divine status (Stol 1991: 203). Despite the specific linguistic features of the modern Shiite names compared to the Old Babylonian ones, from a semantic point of view, they are both based on the same principle. Given this, the Ancient North Arabian and pre-Islamic names of the ‘Abd-X type should not be seen as an ‘exceptional’ case. The question of names and ancestor cult, however, still needs an in-depth approach in view of the archeological and textual evidence (which is outside the scope of this article).

Still, we have the pre-Islamic name ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, lit. “Servant of the demanding one” (i.e. the grandfather of the Prophet), which appears to have no association with a monarch, social group, or ancestor cult. In order to

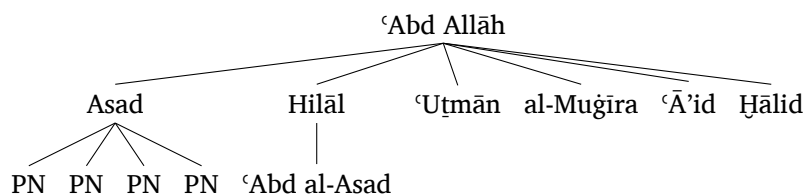
<sup>8</sup>The practice of using the name of the king as a theophoric element goes back to ancient Mesopotamia (Edzard 1998: 109).

<sup>9</sup>According to (Fahd 1968: 46–47), there was a god and a mountain (between al-Hijaz and Najd) known as al-Aswad, meaning “the greatest, chief” and also “black” (Lane 1863-1893: 1463b).

<sup>10</sup>On these rulers, see ‘Alī (2001: 210).

understand this name, I will highlight two classical reports concerning it and see if they offer us a clue to decode our ‘Abd al-Asad as well as some of the unidentified names of the ‘Abd-X type in their Ancient Arabian context. The first report mentions that the birth-name of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib was Šayba “Gray-haired” and that he spent his early infancy with his mother among her tribe. After some years his paternal uncle, al-Muṭṭalib<sup>11</sup> came to take him back to Mecca. When the people of Mecca saw the boy sitting behind him on the camel, they thought he was his servant and therefore called him ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib “Servant of al-Muṭṭalib” (Ibn Hišām 1995: 184–185). This report also indicates a kind of affiliation through manumission (*walāʾ*) if we apply it to names which are based on tribal names. In other words, if a person was affiliated to a tribe (i.e. became a *mawlā*), he would be consequently identified as its ‘servant’. The other report mentions that ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib was named so because he was fatherless and brought up by his paternal uncle. Arabs in the pre-Islamic times used to name the fatherless boy ‘Abd-PN after the man who took care of him (Al-Ḥalabī 1875: 4–5). Conceptually, both reports indicate a kind of patronage and protection towards the named individual, regardless of their historical veracity.

Considering ‘Abd al-Asad in view of this information, we can trace a branch of his family tree (Caskel 1966 1: 22) and see which hypothesis applies to his case:



As we can see in the chart, ‘Abd al-Asad appears to have been the only son of Hilāl, whereas his uncle Asad (or al-Asad) had four. Most probably, Hilāl died early and his son, like ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, was brought up by his uncle and consequently bore his name.

Summing up, the literal approach of compound personal names is quite hazardous and can easily lead to fanciful conclusions. The pre-Islamic name ‘Abd Bakr (Caskel 1966 2: 123) would evoke a camel cult if we treat the element *bakr* literally as “young camel” and not as a personal or tribal name. Similarly, the element *ʿawf* in ‘Abd ‘Awf (group 6 above) would indicate a bird cult<sup>12</sup> if interpreted as a divine name.

## 5 Conclusion

An investigation of the onomastic evidence of two ancient Semitic languages (Eblaite and Amorite), the Ancient Arabian inscriptions, and the classical narrative sources suggests that the element *al-Asad* in the pre-Islamic name ‘Abd al-Asad should not be interpreted as a divine name/epithet (i.e. Yaḡūt or an

<sup>11</sup>The name is attested 7 times in Caskel (1966 2: 439). We also have another name from the same root: Ṭālib (2 times, *ibid*, 556) and its diminutive Ṭulayb (3 times, *ibid*, 559).

<sup>12</sup>On the etymology of \**awp*- “bird” in Semitic languages, see Militarev & Kogan (2005, no. 48).



anonymous god). Rather, the name could reflect either an 'archaic' astral cult related to Leo or, more probably, an ancient name-giving practice. According to this practice, recorded also in the Ancient North Arabian onomasticon, the child was not only named 'Abd-X in reference to a deity, ruler, or sanctuary, but also after (1) the person who took care of him, (2) his original tribe or the tribe with which he became affiliated (as a freed slave or refugee), or (3) a 'divinized' eponymous ancestor, with a high probability of ancestor cult.

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