

New Ancient North Arabian Inscriptions with References to Nabataea

Nada Al-Rawabdeh
Abdel Qader Al-Husan

Abstract: *The aim of this study is to shed light on two new Ancient North Arabian inscriptions which could contain references to Nabataea; additionally an inscription located on one of the above stones will be examined. Through this paper we aim to explain the word Nbṭ in the Safaitic inscriptions and to shed light on its interpretation in Safaitic. The paper discusses the terms 'yr and 'hn which occur in Safaitic inscriptions.*

Keywords: *Nabataean, Jordan, Ancient North Arabian, Safaitic inscriptions,*

1. INTRODUCTION

The two stones being published in this article were found in Wadi Salma in Jordan. The wadi is located in the Jordanian *badia*, in the *ḥarra* basalt desert covering the northeastern corner of the country. The site is found 35km away from the village of as-Safawi (see fig. 1), travelling in a northeasterly direction. The wadi itself is approximately 17km long and contains a remarkable concentration of Safaitic, Greek and Arabic (Islamic) inscriptions on the black, patinated basalt stones which make up the landscape of the *ḥarra*. The name of the wadi is said to be derived from a local legend about a girl called Salma who was killed by her brother in this very wadi as part of an honour-killing ritual. It seems more likely that the name Salma is derived from the Arabic *seyl al-ma'* meaning “flow of water” on account of the stream running through the middle of this wadi, which at certain times of the year is a considerable body of water (Abbadi 2006: 17).

2. FORM OF THE INSCRIPTION

The inscriptions are chiseled on two basalt stones using very thin strokes; the colour of the stone is dark so the inscriptions show up clearly in a yellowish colour. The first stone

which contains *inscription 1* is about 30cm long and roughly oval shaped; the surface is not completely flat and therefore not necessarily ideal for inscribing, however the author has achieved this anyway. Rock art next to the inscription depicts a horse and a gazelle; the feet of the rider can be seen underneath the horse but for some reason his head and torso are not visible above the horse. In spite of this, a spear can still be seen which suggests that the rider is



Fig. 1. Map of Jordan showing the location of Wadi Salma (Source: Google Earth)

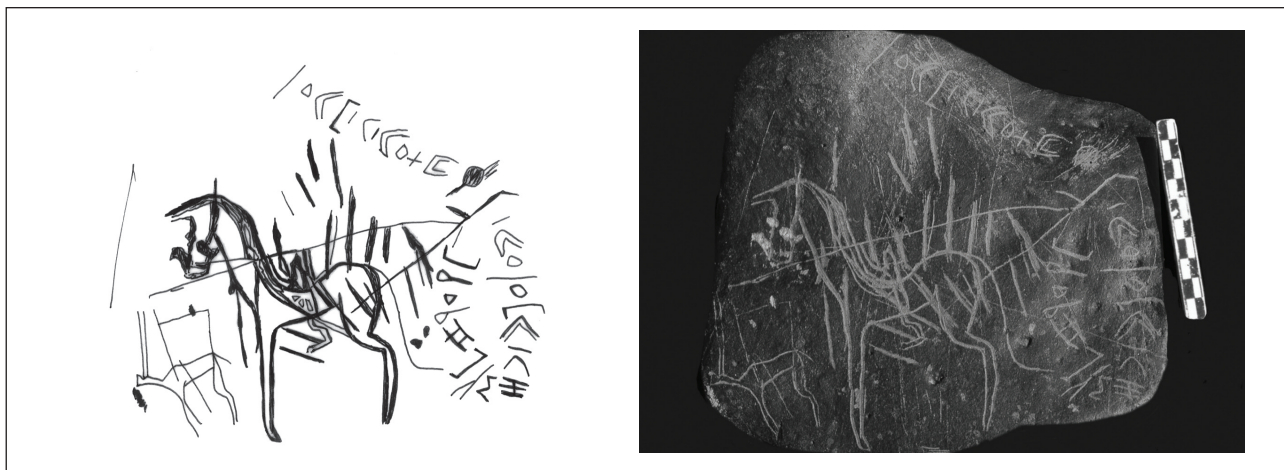


Fig. 2. Tracing and photo of the inscription No. 1

attempting to hunt the gazelle. All of the letters are clear and easily legible, with the possible exception of the w and the g. in the middle of the inscription: the w has been obscured by a scratch, while the line of the g. has merged with the line of the spear from the accompanying rock art.

The second stone here presented contains inscriptions 2 and 3. *Inscription 2* is carved clearly in very large letters, and is presented alongside *inscription 3* which is also clear but which is comprised of small letters. In both cases the reading is quite clear.

Inscription 1

Transliteration

l 'mrn bn m'tm w gnm 'l- 'r m- nbṭ f h rḏy 'yr

Translation

By 'mrn son of M'tm and he plundered a caravan from [the] Nabataeans and O Rḏy [grant] vengeance"

Commentary:

This inscription begins as the vast majority of the Safaitic inscriptions do, with the letter *l*, sometimes known as the *lam auctoris* and usually translated as "by" (Al-Manaser 2008: 75). All of the names mentioned in the genealogy are

well known from the Safaitic corpus, although the exact combination has not been seen before. This inscription contains a narrative portion, a genealogy and a prayer.

Prayer:

The author of this inscriptions prays to the deity Rḏy (see below), this prayer includes the verb 'yr, the basic meaning of which is "go away" (see Lane 2207 c). It could be interpreted that the author intends to pray for the Nabataeans to go away. It is interesting to note that the verb 'yr is found mostly in connection to the deity Rḏy. Other examples of inscriptions containing the verb are given here:

- KRS 1210⁽¹⁾ contains the phrase *f [[h]] 'lt 'yr* which is translated as "so O 'lt [grant] vengeance".
- KRS 1695⁽²⁾ contains the phrase *w h rḏy 'yr m 'yr {-h}* which is translated as "O Rḏy blind whoever scratches {it} out." The usual form of the verb "to blind" is 'wr instead of 'yr but this shift from w to y is not unprecedented in Safaitic (see Al-Jallad 2015: 125).
- HaNSC 33⁽³⁾ contains the phrase *f h rḏy 'yr* which is translated by Harahsheh as "drive away" (*rahḥil* or *ḏahhib* in Arabic).

The deity Rḏw appears in Safaitic inscriptions

in two different forms: *rdw* (c.f. C 233⁽⁴⁾) and *rdy*. Littmann believed that *Rḏw* is the masculine form and *Rḏy* is the feminine form but this claim is unsubstantiated (1940: 106-7); it could equally be a dialectal difference of no interpretative significance.

The term *ḡnmt* is found in the Safaitic corpus with different meanings. It often means “spoil” or “booty”, but also appears to be a noun expressing the agent and has to be interpreted as “raiders”, for example in WH 3736.1. The verb is not so well attested, but seems to mean “to raid”, possibly with a II-form derivation meaning “to grant”, for example in LP 259. In Classical Arabic, the verb *ḡanima* is translated as “he, or they, (i.e. a man ... or party of men) obtained, got, or took spoil, or a thing [as spoil]” (Lane, 2300c), and *ḡanimatun* is translated “booty, spoil, or plunder” (Lane, 2301b). In this inscription the form is a verb, which seems to fit this interpretation perfectly well, and we may translate here “to plunder”.

The term *ʿr* occurs in Classical Arabic (*ʿair*) where it refers to a caravan (Lane 2207c). Another possibility for the meaning of this term in Safaitic is “wild ass” or “ass” (CSNS 819; KRS 1319). One might favour this interpretation over that of the caravan in this instance if we assume that it would be a very great endeavour

for one man to plunder a whole Nabataean caravan, when by contrast one donkey would be a perfectly manageable feat. In KRS 1542⁽⁵⁾ the interpretation “caravan” seems to be correct because the context states that he is waiting. And waiting for a caravan seems much more likely than waiting for a donkey.

Inscription 2 -3

Transliteration

l ʿws¹ bn s²mt bn s¹r bn ḡyr¹ l bn zkr w bny l- gfft

Translation

By ʿws¹ son of S²mt son of S¹r son of Ḡyr¹ son of Zkr and he built for Gfft

Commentary

As in the other inscription, the genealogy is introduced by the *lam auctoris*. In addition to the genealogy, which contains five names, there is a short narrative consisting of the verb *bny* which means “he built”. The verb is followed by the preposition *l* but can also appear followed by the preposition *ʿl*. This formula is very widely attested in the Safaitic corpus. Since these inscriptions are usually found around cairns or other grave sites, it seems likely that the *bny* refers to the building of a cairn for the person whose name is introduced by the preposition

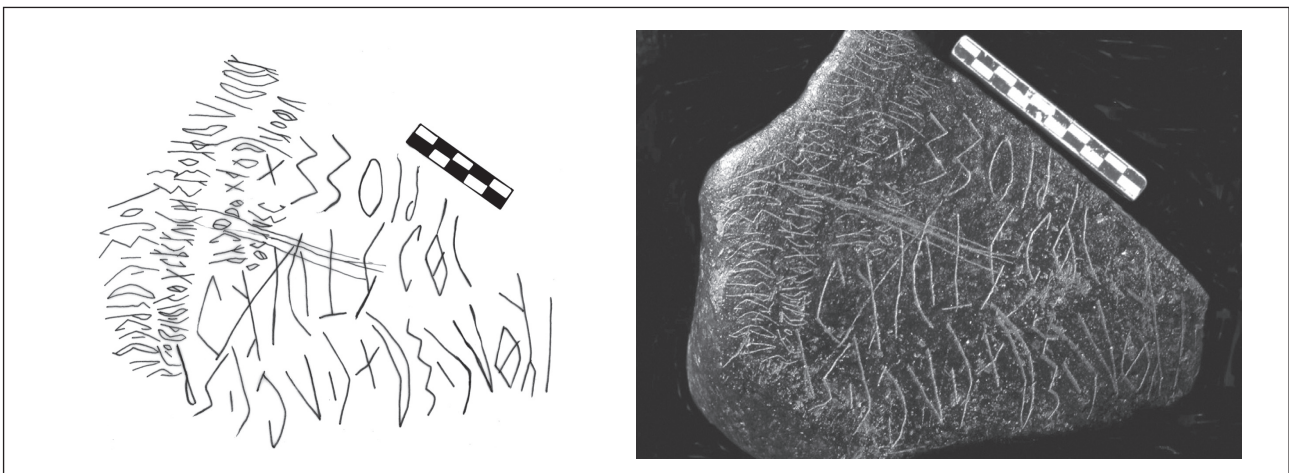


Fig. 3. Tracing and photo of the inscription No. 2 and 3

(HCH 3; ThSaf 16).

Inscription 3

Transliteration

*l 'rfn bn mgyr bn ms'k bn 'md bn mlk w hrs
b's' nbṭ f h s²'hqm s'lm m- b's' w 'hn b- mgdt w
'wr ḏ y'wr [h-] [s']fr*

Translation

By 'rfn son of Mgyr son of Ms'k son of 'md son of Mlk and he anticipated the affliction of the Nabataeans and so O S²'hqm may he be secure from affliction and dwell in glory and blind whoever scratches out {the writing}

Commentary

This inscription comprises a genealogy, a narrative and a lengthy prayer section. All the terms are known from the corpus of Safaitic inscriptions but with different meanings.

Narrative

The term *hrs* occurs frequently in Safaitic and means “to keep watch for” or “to look after” (LP 354; C 1591; HCH 102; WH 577; ISB 115). As Al-Jallad explains (2015: 319), the verb is sometimes used in connection to various intangible things and therefore must have a semantically related meaning “to anticipate” in order to make sense in these cases. Macdonald seems to concur, translating “he anticipated the affliction” since affliction is not ostensibly something which can be kept watch for.

The term *'hn* is relatively rare in Safaitic (WH 2999; KRS 38; KRS 3295), and of the few occurrences some are names (C 1923). The basic meaning seems to be that of “staying” or “remaining” in a place, hence our translation “dwell in glory”. Note Lane’s record of the phrase *'a 'taahu min 'aahini maalihi* “he gave him of what had been long possessed, &c., of his property, &c.” (2185b) which could also provide a semantic field that might be productive in this context, in which we might

envisage a verbal form from the root *'hn* giving a meaning “grant him honour for a long time”. This interpretation rests on the interpretation of *mgdt* which we interpret in light of Classical Arabic: *mağd* “glory; honour; dignity; nobility” (Lane, 2690a). Al-Jallad writes that when this is applied to a person it can designate someone who is generous, so we might also conceive of an interpretation “dwell in bounty” or “grant to him generously and for a long time”. The term *mgdt* occurs frequently in Safaitic and means (abundance) (SIJ 836; KRS 836; HaNSB 220).

Prayer

The author addresses his prayer to the deity *s²'hqm*, a known god in the Safaitic inscriptions, which some scholars have linked to the “God of the Caravan”. He is referred to in the literature as Shay' *al-Qawm*, perhaps “shepherd of the people”, variously associated with sobriety and identified as a rival to Dushara (Taylor 2012: 126; Alpass 2013: 146).

Conclusion

It appears from the Safaitic inscriptions that the authors considered the people of Nbt, or the Nabataeans, as a social group different from themselves. It is difficult to say how they considered the group, whether positively or negatively, because the evidence we have does not create a clear picture. These two inscriptions represent two more which mention the word *nbṭ*, and it is hoped that as the small corpus of inscriptions which make reference to the Nabataeans grows, so will our understanding of the relationship between the Nabataeans and the authors of the Safaitic and Ancient North Arabian inscriptions.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the OCIANA project for allowing us to use their materials, and Mr M. C. A. Macdonald for his suggestions, and the editor of the journal for his patient and helpful assistance.

Dr. Nada Al-Rawabdeh: Faculty of Archaeology and Tourism, the University of Jordan, 11942, Amman, Jordan.

Dr. Abdel Qader Al-Husan: Department of Antiquities, Al-Mafraq, Jordan.

ملخص: يهدف البحث الى إلقاء الضوء على نقشين عربيين شماليين يتضمنان إشارة إلى الأنباط، فضلاً عن مناقشة نقش آخر وجد على أحد الأحجار موضع الدراسة. إضافة إلى ذلك قدّم البحث تفسيراً وشرحاً مفصلاً لمصطلحي (عير وعهن) في النقوش العربية الشمالية القديمة.

Sigla

- C** Ryckmans, G., 1951. *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum: Pars Quinta, Inscriptiones Saracenicae Continens: Tomus I, Fasciculus I, Inscriptiones Safaiticae*. Paris: E Reipublicae Typographeo.
- CSNS** Clark, V.A., 1979. *A Study of New Safaitic Inscriptions from Jordan*. Thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Middle Eastern Studies, University of Melbourne. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International.
- HCH** Harding, G. L., (1953). The cairn of Hani'. *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 2, 8–56.
- HaNSC** Ḥarāḥṣah, R.M.A. Nuqūš ṣafā' iyyah muḥtārah min al-bādiyah al-urdunniyah. *Journal of Epigraphy and Rock Drawings* 1, 2007: 29-52.
- ISB** Oxtoby, W. G., 1968. *Some Inscriptions of the Safaitic Bedouin* (American Oriental Series 50). New Haven: American Oriental Society 1968.
- KRS** Safaitic inscriptions recorded by G.M.H. King on the Basalt Desert Rescue Survey (now published in OCIANA).
- LP** Littmann, E., 1943. *Safaitic Inscriptions, Syria*. (Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904–1905 and 1909. Division IV, Section C). Leiden: Brill.
- OCIANA** The Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia project at the Khalili Research Centre, University of Oxford <http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/index.php>
- SIJ** Winnett, F., 1957. *Safaitic Inscriptions from Jordan* (Near and Middle East Series 2). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- ThSaf** Al-Duyayb [Al-Theeb], S.A. 2003. *Nuqūš ṣafawīyah min šamālī 'l-mamlakat al-'arabīyat al-sa'ūdīyah*. Al-Jawf: Mu'asasah 'Abd al-raḥmān al-Sudairī al-ḥairīyah.
- WH** Winnett, F.V., and Harding, G.L., 1978. *Inscriptions from Fifty Safaitic Cairns* (Near and Middle East Series 9). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Notes

- (1) KRS 1210: **Transliteration:** *l 's'n bn n'm w wgm 'l ḥbb f [[h]] 'lt 'yr* Translation: By 's'n son of N'm and he grieved for a friend and so O 'lt [grant] vengeance:
- (2) KRS 1695: **Transliteration:** *l qdy bn y's' bn drh bn 'nq bn s'ḥr w ḥrṣ qn hmlk f h yṭ' flt l -h w tẓr w h rdy 'yr m 'yr {-h}* **Translation:** By Qdy son of Y's' son of Drh son of 'nq son of S'ḥr and he was keeping a look out for the king's slave and so O Yṭ' may he be relieved and he was waiting and O Rdy blind whoever scratches {it} out.

- (3) HaNSC 33 **Transliteration:** *l 'd'gt bn s'wd bn zlm w wlh 'l- mkyn 's' -h fh rdy 'yr* **Translation:** By 'd'gt son of S'wd son of Zlm and he was distraught with grief for Mkyn his friend so O Rdy make him go away.
- (4) C 233: **Transliteration** *l 'qwm bn trf bn kdr w rdw nqm m- s'qwl w hm* **Translation:** By 'qwm son of Trf son of Kdr and Rdw (grant) vengeance from S'qwl and Hm
- (5) KRS 1542: **Transliteration:** *l hlšt bn rb bn mtr w hll h- {{s'}}{{n}}{{n}} w tẓr m- hrn h- 'r* **Translation:** By Hlšt son of Rb son of Mtr and he camped [on] the {track} and he was waiting for the caravan from [the] Hawrān

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