

The Inscription of Zā'en son of Keḥsemān and Knowledge of Greek Among the Nomads East of Ḥawrān

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Abstract: This inscription re-edits a Greek inscription carved by an Arabian nomad of the ḥarrah called Zā'en son of Keḥsemān and offers a few remarks on the phenomenon of Arabic-Greek bilingualism in the area roughly twenty centuries ago.

Keywords: Safaitic inscriptions, Greek inscriptions, Arabian nomad, Zā'en son of Keḥsemān.

I. Introduction

Around 2000 years ago, an Arabian nomad named Zā'en son of Keḥsemān⁽¹⁾ served in a Roman auxiliary military unit in the basalt desert east of Ḥawrān. He produced a number of Safaitic inscriptions during his time in the troop, for himself and one for his colleague, a Roman named Gaius. In 2020, I published a panel of his inscriptions in collaboration with Z. Al-Salameen, Y. Shdaifat, and R. Harahsheh, who had discovered these texts during their Wadi al-Khudaṛī epigraphic survey project.⁽²⁾ These included three Safaitic texts and one Greek inscription. I will repeat the Safaitic texts below:

AGK-Saf 1

[l-z'n] bn kḥsmn bn znn d 'l kn w 'srq ntn
ngy znn bn kḥsmn fh lt slm

'[l-Zā'en] son of Keḥsemān son of Zānen of the lineage of Kawn and he set off to the inner desert the year Zānen son of Keḥsemān was announced commander so, O Allāt, may he be secure'

AGK-Saf 2-3

l gyṣ d 'l rm h-dr m-dr{b} ṣ 'rl

'By Gaius of the people of Rome, at this place, from [the] {road} of Ṣ'rl'

AGK-Saf 4

l z'n bn kḥsmn

'By Zā'en son of Keḥsemān'

The identity of Gaius – whether a Roman soldier or officer – is unclear. It seems unlikely that a Roman would have learned Safaitic and taken up carving inscriptions. Rather, it is more probable that the Safaitic text bearing his name was carved by his colleague, Zā'en. The use of *d 'l rm* to describe his identity as a Roman speaks to an Arabian view of social relations – the word was used to refer equally to the genealogically-based nomadic tribes and nations like the Romans, Nabataeans, and Jews.⁽³⁾

In the original edition of this text, it was suggested that Zā'en not only carved the Safaitic texts but the three-line Greek one as well. The first two lines of the Greek text bore his hellenized name in transcription. The third line was poorly carved but was, in any case, not the name of his grandfather, *znn*. From the photographs available to me, I carefully suggested that it could be read as εσρ{α}θ, perhaps producing a transcription of the prefix conjugation (present tense) of the common Safaitic verb *srt* "to serve in a troop."⁽⁴⁾ The presence of a transcribed Arabic phrase – which is not unprecedented – suggested that the Greek text was carved by an Arabic speaker.⁽⁵⁾



Fig. 1: A second inscription of Zā'en son of Keḥsemān and a re-edition of his Greek text (by the author).



Fig. 2: Photograph of AGK-Gr.

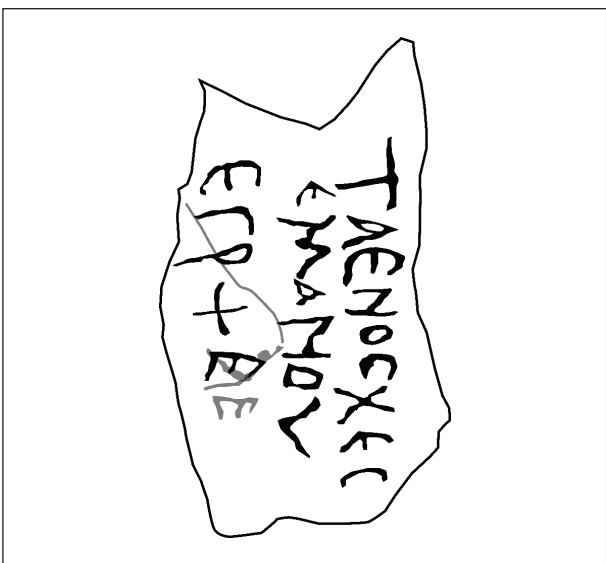


Fig. 3: Tracing of AGK-Gr 1.

II. A new text by Zā'en son of Keḥsemān and a re-edition of his Greek text

During the 2019 Badia Epigraphic Survey expedition, I was able to visit the site of this panel and document the text more accurately, especially the Greek portion.⁽⁶⁾ But before we turn our attention to that inscription, let us discuss another text that Zā'en produced in the same area. This inscription is carved along the edge of a stone belonging to a funerary complex of another group about 100 meters from the panel edited in 2020.⁽⁷⁾ It appears to have been carved after the primary inscriptions of the stone were set down, as it carefully avoids intersecting with latter's glyphs.

l z 'n bn kḥsmn w srt snt ngy znn bn kḥsmn f h lt w gddf slm

'By Zā'en son of Keḥsemān and he served in a troop the year Znn son of Keḥsemān was announced commander so O Allāt and Gadd-Dayf, may he be secure'

Zā'en, in this inscription, describes his activity as *srt* "to serve in a troop"⁽⁸⁾ while in AGK-Saf 1 he uses the verb *'srq* "to set off to the inner desert", further confirming that the latter can have a military connotation.⁽⁹⁾ The present inscription confirms that Zā'en was serving in a military unit, which included a Roman soldier.⁽¹⁰⁾ In 2021, I published a similar text produced by a Safaitic-writing soldier serving in a troop with a Roman and an Iranian mercenary.⁽¹¹⁾

So then, let us return to the Greek inscription, AGK-Grk 1. The final line of the Greek text, it turns out, was subject to damage and only upon the close examination of the stone itself did its correct reading reveal itself. The photograph available to me when producing the original edition of this text caused the + sign to appear connected to the natural crack on the rock. This crack continued and reached the lower part of the Gamma, giving it the appearance

of a Sigma. However, on the stone it became clear that the two are in fact not connected and the reading of both letters should be Psi and Gamma, respectively. In addition to this, the letter that I originally took as a Theta was in fact a damaged epsilon, and a very lightly carved and perhaps partially erased epsilon – which was not apparent on the original photograph – followed this letter. I therefore submit a new tracing of the Greek text below.

Reading of AGK-Gr 1

TAENOS

XEΣEMANOY

ΕΓΡΨΕ{Ε}

‘Zā'en son of Keḥsemān {wrote}’

The correct reading of the final line is therefore εγρψε{ε}. This word does not mean anything in the current form, but we may reconstruct the series of errors that led to it. I would suggest that Zā'en wished to terminate his Greek inscription with ἔγραψε, the 3rd singular aorist of γράφω “to write.” He accidentally omitted the Alpha following the Rho and moved directly to the Psi. Perhaps once he noticed this error while carving the Epsilon, he attempted to transform it to an Alpha but abandoned it as it would not be in the correct position. He then carved a second epsilon after it, but then realized the word was completely mutilated and attempted to erase it. One can speculate that the reason for the missing Alpha was the interference from the Safaitic writing tradition, which did not indicate word-internal short or long vowels.

Signatures terminating with “he wrote” are common in Nabataean but are quite rare in Safaitic.⁽¹²⁾ Nevertheless, this mutilated verb confirms that Zā'en was the author of all the texts on the panel. He was obviously not as confident in inscribing Greek as he was in Safaitic. While he carved his name in a relatively elegant script,



Fig. 4: MISS.I 1 (Courtesy OCIANA).

he faltered when writing the verb, even though it is in a grammatically correct form. This may suggest that Zā'en's difficulties were not with the language but with writing it, especially on rock.

III. Why write Greek?

There is a critical mass of Safaitic-Greek inscriptions such that we may afford some space to speculate on why these authors chose to carve Greek graffiti, sometimes alongside their Safaitic compositions. Safaitic inscriptions were meant to be consumed by passersby – they were meant to be read and interacted with.⁽¹³⁾ The texts contain central elements of personal identity – names, genealogies, and tribal affiliations. The choice to use Greek in such a context may be a way of emphasizing one's connection with the settled world and specifically with the Roman military, both of which may have been matters of prestige.

Most Safaitic-Greek inscriptions are relatively short, usually repeating the name of the author, sometimes with the memorial formula ΜΝΗΣΘΗ.⁽¹⁴⁾ They do not tell us much about their author's command of Greek but they do display, to even those who do not know the language, an affiliation with Rome. One of the longest Greek texts known so far is that of Śa'ār son of Keḥsemān, also a Kawnite. Macdonald et al. published their text in 1996 from 'īsāwī, Syria.⁽¹⁵⁾



Fig. 5: The inscription of ṣ'ar bn kḥsmn at Ghadīr al-Ghuṣayn (photo by the author).

CAAPOC XECEMANOY CAIΦHNOC
ΦYΛHC XAYNHNΩN

Ṣa'ār son of Keḥsemān, Ḍayfite of the lineage
of Kawn

The inscription is a signature: it gives not only Ṣa'ār's clan but also the larger tribal confederacy to which he belonged, the 'āl ḍayf.⁽¹⁶⁾ As the editors remarked, a passerby read Ṣa'ār's Greek inscription and wrote a Safaitic inscription in reaction to it: *l 'tm bn rb (w) wgd mly ṣ'ar* 'By 'tm son of Rb (and) he found the inscription of Ṣa'ār,' treating the text exactly as one would a Safaitic inscription.⁽¹⁷⁾

Ṣa'ār produced another text containing almost the same content at Ghadīr al-Ghuṣayn. Unlike the large, monumental letters carved in the first

inscription, this one is much humbler, carved by a small, sharp instrument. This version is a bit more elaborate, perhaps owing to the fact that its small letters were not as laborious to carve as his previous text.⁽¹⁸⁾

CAAPOC XECEMANOY TOY XECEMANOY
CAIΦHNOC ΦYΛHC XAYNHNΩN MNHCΘH

'May Ṣa'ār son of Keḥsemān son of Keḥsemān a Ḍayfite of the section of Kawnites be remembered'

Perhaps then it is significant that two men of the lineage of Kawn and ultimately of the lineage of Ḍayf were using Greek. It could be that the section of Kawn had particularly good relations with the Romans and were habitually drafted into Roman auxiliary military units. As such, some of its members came to regard Greek as a marker of their identity.

Sigla

AGK-Saf Safaitic inscriptions in Al-Jallad et al. 2020.

AGK-Grk Greek inscription in Al-Jallad et al. 2020.

MISS.I Safaitic inscriptions in Macdonald et al. 1996.

NEH Safaitic inscriptions in Al-Salameen et al. 2018.

SafDict Al-Jallad and Jaworska 2019.

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ملخص: يعيد هذا البحث قراءة نقش صفائي - إغريقي، كتبه ظاعن بن كحسمان، وكان أحد المتنقلين العرب الذي سكنوا الحرّة شرق حوران. بعد تحليل النص، يناقش الباحث دور الإغريقية كلغة للكتابة عند عرب المنطقة قبل ألفي عام.

Notes

- (1) The vocalization of this name derives from its Greek transcription in AGK-Gr 1.
- (2) Al-Jallad et al. 2020.
- (3) See Macdonald 2020. The Jews are frequently referred to as an 'l; on these references, see Al-Jallad 2021a: 43. A Nabataean who carved – or had carved for him – a Safaitic inscription refers to his social group, the Nabataeans, as an 'l as well; see NEH 13. On the use of 'l in the inscriptions of ancient Arabia, see Macdonald and Nehmé 2015.
- (4) SafDict, 123.
- (5) There is one inscription which transcribes the Arabic language of the Safaitic inscriptions in Greek letters; see Al-Jallad and al-Manaser 2015.
- (6) This mission aims to comprehensively document the epigraphy and associated archaeological sites in the Jordanian Ḥarrah. It was initiated in 2015 by Michael Macdonald. The 2019 summer campaign was led by Ahmad Al-Jallad and Ali al-Manaser.
- (7) The stone belongs to a funerary complex of a man called Zā'en son of Karzān. The site boasts nearly two dozen texts mentioning grieving for him, the construction of his nfs “funerary monument” and his burial. The edition of these texts and a description of the site is in preparation.
- (8) See Macdonald 2014 on the interpretation of this word; see also SafDict 123.
- (9) For further examples of the use of 'srq in a military context, see Al-Jallad 2021:84.
- (10) On this phenomenon, see Macdonald 2014.
- (11) See Al-Jallad and Bernard 2021.
- (12) A common way of terminating Nabataean graffiti is the phrase ktb “he wrote” or ktb yd-h “the writing of his hand.”
- (13) Al-Jallad, forthcoming.
- (14) An important exception is NEJIII Grk2, in which the author translates the narrative portion of his Safaitic inscription into Greek. Unfortunately, this writer only recorded his name with no genealogy, so it is impossible to determine if he, too, was a Kawnite.
- (15) See Macdonald et al. 1996: 480-484.
- (16) On the lineage of Kawn and ḍaif, see Macdonald 2020: 344.
- (17) On the inscription finding formula, see Al-Jallad and Jaworska 2019: 15.
- (18) This text has the siglum MG 1 in OCIANA but has not yet been formally published.

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