

New Nabataean Inscriptions from Qā' al-Mū'atadel

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Qā' al-Mū'atadel mountain is situated to the north-east of Madā'in Šāliḥ at a distance of about ten kilometres on the way to Ḥā'il province. On the sides of this mountain, Ḥ. Abū al-Ḥassan found a number of texts written in three scripts:

1. Texts written in the Nabataean script which are the subject of our study.
2. Two texts written in the Thamudic script.¹
3. A group of texts that go back to the early Islamic era.

These texts, which are written in three different scripts, suggest that Qā' al-Mū'atadel mountain is situated beside a trade road that was used for a long period of time. The two Thamudic texts, as the shapes of letters indicate, go back to the period between the second and the first centuries AD, i.e. the period known as the late Thamudic era.² The five Nabataean texts, as the shapes of the letters indicate, go back to the middle and late first century AD.³ These texts of different styles indicate that the people who used this road had the habit of writing on the faces of the rocks during these periods as they passed by. Several mountains along this road connecting al-Ḥijāz with Ḥā'il have other early Arabic inscriptions. The full corpus will only be known if a comprehensive survey is made to identify these writings and inscriptions.

Apart from the work done by A. Jaussen and R. Savignac which led to a good study of the material collected by these travellers,⁴ J.T. Milik and J. Starcky, in *Ancient Records from North Arabia*, made a study of one hundred and thirty

1 Although these two Thamudic inscriptions will be studied by Abū al-Ḥassan, this does not mean that a preliminary reading of these texts cannot be made. The first one, written under Nabataean inscription no.4, is to be read from right to left as follows:

l'sd bn lb bn swdt d' l ylk (ylgr) w wtm 'l lb w' l hld w' lz

By 'sd son of lb son of swdt from the tribe of ylk (ylgr) and he looked for lb and for hld and for z....

It is noteworthy that the verb (مذ) occurs here, for the first time in the Thamudic inscriptions, according to our information. The second text consisting of two short lines, was written to the left. It can conservatively be read as follows:

zn dnlwd bn nyr, 'This is dnlwd son of nyr'.

2 For more information see al-Theeb 1999: 5-9.

3 Healey 1990-1: 47, table 1.

4 Jaussen and Savignac 1914: 85-235.

Nabataean inscriptions, of which one hundred and eight inscriptions are from al-‘Ulā province. Forty-four texts from this collection were studied for the first time.⁵ This was followed by A. al-Ansary’s study of eighteen Nabataean texts including Nabataean text JS 17, which is close in style and vocabulary to standard Arabic.⁶ Graf published twenty-four texts, seven of which were written in Nabataean script and three of which were studied and published for the first time.⁷ In 1990 J. Healey published a study of a Nabataean funerary inscription found during the cleaning process carried out by the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums. This inscription goes back to the period of reign of King Rabbel II.⁸ This discovery was followed by a detailed study of the Madā’in Šāliḥ funerary inscriptions which amounted to thirty-eight texts.⁹ The Saudi Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in AH 1408 carried out a survey of inscriptions that covered the area from al-Madīnah al-Munawarah in the south to the borders of Tabūk in the north, including al-‘Ulā region. As mentioned in the report published in *Atlat*, the Nabataean inscriptions in this province amounted to three hundred and four.¹⁰

The most recently published study on the al-Ḥijr inscriptions is the one made by the present author, which contained a total of two hundred and sixty Nabataean inscriptions.¹¹

The importance of the group of inscriptions published here lies in the appearance of the particle ‘y, ‘yes’ (see inscription no. 5), which did not appear before except in the texts found in al-Jawf province. The appearance of this particle in one of the texts of this group indicates that it was not limited to the dialect of the Nabataeans of al-Jawf.

These five texts provide sixteen items of vocabulary and some proper names, including the proper name *ṭny*’ or *zny*’ which occurs for the first time in the Nabataean inscriptions. The analytical comparative study of the proper names shows

5 Winnett and Reed 1970: 141–60. The inscriptions published for the first time are 17 in number. Of these, nos. 32–38 were found at a site situated 30 km east of Madā’in Šāliḥ. No. 50 was found in al-‘Ulā’, while the rest of the texts, nos. 60, 64, 73, 76, 97, 99, 100, 102, 103, 108, 110, 113, 114, 116, 120, 124, 125, 127, came from al-Ḥijr.

6 al-Ansary, Ghazal and King 1984: 25–41.

7 Graf 1990: 196–202. The new inscriptions are nos. 8, 15, 23.

8 Healey 1990: 63–9.

9 Healey 1993: nos. 1–38, 68–236.

10 Kabāwī *et al.* 1989: 63–4.

11 al-Theeb 1998: 29–327.

that six of them are simple proper names (one-word names) as in the name *'nmw* (see inscription no. 5) and *mly* (see inscription no. 4) in the *fā'il* form, while the two proper names *khln* (no. 2) and *'srn* (no. 3) occur in the *fā'alān* form. The other proper names occurred in different forms. The two proper names *ṭny'* (no. 1) and *w'lw* (no. 3) are hypocoristics, while the names *rbyb'l* (no. 4), and *'bdmlkw* (no. 5) represent nominal phrases. The first means 'enslaved, given to the god El', while the second means 'servant of *mlkw*'. The study of these proper names has, from the social point of view, indicated that some of them were in the form of wishes and prayers for the newborn, such as *'nmw*, 'winner, gainer' (no. 2), *mly*, praying for 'long life and wealth' for the newborn (no. 4), *khln*, praying for 'long life' for the newborn, and *ḥwrw* which is apparently derived from the animal name *ḥwr*, meaning 'young camel' (no. 1). There is also a proper name derived from a time or an event, *'srn*, 'born in the afternoon' (no. 3). If the reading *ṭny'* is correct, it is a proper name derived from a physical quality, meaning 'tall and big' (no. 1).

Inscription no. 1 (Fig. 1)

šlm ṭny' br ḥwrw

Peace of *ṭny'* son of *ḥwrw*

Commentary:

A number of early Arab-Islamic inscriptions were made on the face of this rock beside the short Nabataean inscription which was written in a good style and hence was satisfactorily read. The appearance of two different scripts that go back to different time-periods potentially indicates continued human settlement around the site because it lies beside the trade road that links al-Ḥijr with the known sites in the northern part of the Arabian peninsula towards Jubbah and other sites¹² up to the early Islamic period.

This memorial text begins with the singular masculine noun *šlm* meaning 'greetings, peace', widely known in the Nabataean inscriptions and followed by the name of the engraver of the text, *ṭny'* or *ṣny'* as the first letter has two possible values. Although the first proper name did not appear before in the Nabataean inscriptions, it appeared in the Thamudic inscriptions in the form *ṭny'*¹³, which can be connected with

¹² al-Theeb 1999: 25–119.

¹³ Harding 1971: 389.

al-tunn (الطن) 'fathom', or *al-tunnī* (الطنى) meaning 'big body'.¹⁴ The second reading was known in the form *znn* in the Nabataean inscriptions.¹⁵ Littmann had compared it with the proper name *znn'l*¹⁶ in the Safaitic inscriptions.¹⁷ *zn* was compared with the Syriac word *ʾnn*, 'to be eager, zealous, apply oneself'.¹⁸ It might be an abbreviated proper name (hypocoristic) meaning 'protected by + name of God'.

The simple proper name *hwrw* preceded by *br*, 'son of', occurs in this form in other Nabataean inscriptions.¹⁹ It also occurred in the form *hwr* in Thamudic and Safaitic²⁰ and Lihyanite inscriptions.²¹ We can connect it with the Arabic word *al-hawār* meaning, 'the young camel'.²²

Inscription no. 2 (Fig. 2)

šlm khln 'nmw

Peace of *khln* son of *'nmw*

Commentary:

The fine style in which this text was written shows that the engraver had mastered the Nabataean script. In addition to the fineness of the calligraphy, the writer also carefully differentiated between the letters that occur at the end of a word and those that occur in the beginning or middle of a word, such the letters M and N. It is also noteworthy that through the forms of the letters H, N and W, the inscription can be considered to go back to the early first century AD,²³ during which period the Nabataeans controlled the region and specifically al-Hijr. The name of the engraver of the text, in the *fa'alān* form *khln* had occurred in other Nabataean inscriptions²⁴ as well as in the Thamudic, Safaitic²⁵ and

14 Ibn Manẓūr 1956: XIII, 269.

15 Cantineau 1930: 102; Negev 1990: 33.

16 Littmann 1914: 85.

17 Winnett and Harding 1978: 366; Littmann 1943: nos. 142, 179, 210, 254.

18 Costaz 1963: 129.

19 al-Theeb 1993: 216–7.

20 For Thamudic inscriptions, see al-Theeb 1999: no. 161; King 1990: 495.

21 Harding 1971: 208.

22 Ibn Manẓūr 1956: IV, 21.

23 Healey 1990–1: 47, table i.

24 Cantineau 1930: 106; al-Khaysheh 1986: 99; Negev 1990: 35.

25 For the Thamudic inscriptions see Harding 1952: no. 36; van den Branden 1956: no. 200C2, 147. For the Safaitic inscriptions, see Oxtoby 1968: no. 120; Winnett and Harding 1978: nos. 239, 366, 463, 1149; no. 886. It should be noted that the reading of the proper name in inscriptions nos. 366, 463 should be *bhln* (see Winnett and Harding 1978: pl. 9, 667 and pl. 12, 886) while inscription no.

Sabaeen inscriptions,²⁶ while the same root appears in the form *khylw* in the inscriptions of Palmyra²⁷ and in the form *khl* in Minaean.²⁸ The name is followed by *br* 'son of', and *'nmw*, which occurs in several other Semitic texts.²⁹ This proper name has a *fā'il* form meaning 'winner'.

Inscription no. 3 (Fig. 3)

w'lw br 'srn šlm

w'lw son of *'srn*, peace

Commentary:

The reading given above is the most likely one. The writer demonstrates good knowledge of the Nabataean script. He has differentiated the letters that occur at the end of the word from those that occur at the beginning or in the middle of the word, such as the letter N in the proper name *'srn* and M in the noun *šlm*. The first proper name, *w'lw*, which has been partly obliterated due to erosion, is a simple, one-word, name derived from the root *ل و ل*, meaning 'resort to'. It is known in this form in the Nabataean inscriptions,³⁰ and occurs in the form *w'l* in the Syriac³¹ and South Arabian inscriptions.³² The other proper name is read as *'srn* or *'qrn*. Although it does not occur in the Semitic inscriptions in this form, we prefer the first reading. It does occur in the

886 — according to the drawing, see Winnett 1957: pl. 136, p.119 — should be read as follows: *khl n bn z'nr ql blbl* meaning 'by *khl n* son of *z'nr* from the tribe of *blbl*'.

26 Harding 1971: 506.

27 Stark 1971: 154–5.

28 al-Said 1995: 154–5.

29 It occurs in the form *grm* in the Safaitic inscription (see Harding 1971: 458) and in the form *grmt* in the Thamudic inscriptions (see King 1990: 534). For more comparisons see al-Muaikel and al-Theeb 1996: 115, note: 2, 3, 4; al-Theeb 1997: no. 15, (note the clear spelling and printing mistakes in this paper which were beyond the control of the author). Note also Zayadine 1977: 139–42, who published a study of a Nabataean text which he ascribed on the basis of the shapes of the letters, to the first quarter of the first century AD. He read it as: *dkrwn ḥb w'sl(m) l'nmw rbmrzh' ww'lw brh*, meaning 'in pious remembrance and peace to Ḥanimu the symposiarch and his son Waiku'. However, we give another reading of the fifth word as the reading *mrzh'* does not agree with the style of the accompanying text in the above-mentioned study. The third letter can be read as N or Y but not Z. According to our information, the Z letter is one of the few letters that is never connected with a preceding or succeeding letter. Hence, the most likely reading of this word is *mdbh'* or *mrnh'*. The first is the singular masculine noun meaning 'the slaughterhouse'. Hence 'good greetings to and remembrance of *'nmw* the slaughterhouse-officer and his son *w'lw*'. However *mrnh'* would be a singular masculine, noun, emphatic, equal to the word *al-maranah* (Arabic) which is the best type of incense (see al-Firūzābādī 1987: 282). It would be read as follows: 'good greetings to and remembrance of *'nmw* the incense-owner and his son *w'lw*'.

30 al-Theeb 1993: no. 5, 91–2.

31 al-Jadīr 1983: 370.

32 For more information see al-Said 1995: 174.

form *'srw* in the Nabataean inscriptions³³ and in the form of *'srh* in the Lihyanite texts³⁴ and in the form *'sr* in the Ugaritic and Safaitic inscriptions.³⁵ The proper name *'srn* was also known in the Qatabanian³⁶ and Thamudic writings.³⁷ *'srn* is a simple proper name (one-word name) of the *fā'alan* pattern meaning 'born at the afternoon'.³⁸

Inscription no. 4 (Fig. 4)

bly rbyb 'l br mly šlm

Yes, *rbyb 'l* son of *mly*, please

Commentary:

There are two texts below this short Nabataean inscription. The first is in the Nabataean script and we could not satisfactorily read it. The second is in the Thamudic script and is accompanied by an awkward drawing of a man riding on a donkey. The clear Nabataean text is read as above. It starts with the affirmative particle similar to Arabic *بلى* meaning 'indeed', which frequently occurs in the Nabataean inscriptions. This is followed by a personal name of the nominal phrase type, the first element of which is similar to *رَبِيبٌ* related to *marbūb* (مربوب) meaning 'slave',³⁹ while the second element is the name of the god El. Hence, it means 'slave of the god El'.⁴⁰ It is followed by the simple one-word name *mly* which can be connected to the word *الملا* *al-malā* or *المني* *al-muliy* which is 'the period of life'.⁴¹ Hence, the name is a prayer by his parents to god to give the child a long life and wealth. This name occurs in this form in the Nabataean, Thamudic⁴² and Safaitic inscriptions.⁴³ However, it appears in the form *ml'* in the Syriac inscriptions.⁴⁴

33 Littmann and Meredith 1953: no. 32, no. 49; Negev 1990: 54.

34 Jausen and Savignac 1914: no. 291; Casel 1954: 144.

35 For the Ugaritic inscriptions see Gordon 1965: 460. For the Safaitic Inscriptions see Winnett and Harding 1978: no. 1774.

36 Harding 1971: 423.

37 van den Branden 1950: no. 160, 29, 54.

38 Ibn Manẓūr 1956: IV, 575–7. Jausen and Savignac (1914: II, 510) compare it with the tribal name *bnw 'sr*.

39 Ibn Manẓūr 1956: I, 400–1.

40 For more information see al-Theeb 1993: 240–1; al-Muaikeel and al-Theeb 1996: 148.

41 Ibn Manẓūr 1956: XIV, 290; al-Theeb 1998: no. 223: 4.

42 Cantineau 1930: 114; Negev 1990: 39; al-Khraysheh 1986: 107. For the Thamudic inscriptions see King 1990: 551.

43 Winnett and Harding 1978: nos. 2499, 2501, 3376b. It should be noted that the inscriptions nos. 2499 and 3508 should be read as follows:

lmly bn dl hb(krt)

This young female camel for *mly* son of *dl'*

The second should be read from left to right as follows:

Inscription no. 5 (Fig. 5)

'y šlm 'bdmknw br 'ymw l'lm

Yes, peace of 'bdmknw son of 'ymw for ever

Commentary:

The importance of this short Nabataean text lies in three things. First, the interjection 'y appears for the first time in an inscription outside of al-Jawf region.⁴⁵ Secondly, the appearance of 'y, šlm and l'lm together in one text is unique. Thirdly, if the reading of the first name, 'bdmknw, is accepted, it occurs for the second time in the Nabataean texts.⁴⁶ 'y is interrogatory or exclamatory. The first name could have two interpretations. The first is that it is a genitive compound of the masculine singular noun 'bd (عَبْد), 'slave, servant', and the name mknw which is a proper name that had been adopted by two Nabataean kings.⁴⁷ Hence it means 'servant, slave of King Maliku'. However, there is also a possibility that this name can be read as 'bdmknw, due to similarity between the shapes of L and N in the Nabataean script. The name would be a basiliophoric — i.e. the name of a king takes the place of the name of a god. Compare 'bdhrtt. The second possibility, which is less likely, is that it consists of a nominal sentence, the first element of which is the masculine singular noun (عَبْد), while the second element is related to nakak (نَكَكَ)⁴⁸ 'a sincere, stern slave'. It is a name widely spread in other Nabataean inscriptions.⁴⁹

According to our information, the proper name 'ymw appears, for the first time in the Nabataean inscriptions here but it occurs in the form gymt in the Safaitic inscriptions.⁵⁰ It can be linked to the word al-ḡaym (الغيم) meaning 'thirst, hot abdomen'⁵¹ or 'cloud'. Perhaps his parents named him 'cloud' because cloud bears rain and abundance. gymt occurs as a place-name in the Sabaean inscriptions.⁵² It is

l g' w ymml

'By g' (who) is travelling'.

44 al-Jadir 1983: 382.

45 al-Theeb 1993: no. 94; al-Muaikef and al-Theeb 1996: nos. 2: 1, 5: 1, 6: 1, 17, 22: 1.

46 Starcky 1965: no. 4, 47. For the reading mknw or mknw see al-Theeb 1413h.

47 For more information see Riddle 1961: 144; 'Abas 1987: 48–51.

48 Ibn Manẓūr 1956: X, 499; al-Firūzābādī 1987: 1234.

49 Cantineau 1930: 126; al-Theeb 1993: 230–1.

50 Winnett and Harding 1978: no. 1902; Harding 1971: 460.

51 Ibn Manẓūr 1956: XII, 446.

52 al-Scheibe 1982: 115.

followed by *l'im*, masculine, singular, absolute, common in Semitic (except Akkadian).⁵³

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⁵³ al-Theeb 1994: 44.

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Fig. 1

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Fig. 2

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Fig. 5