New Nabataean Inscriptions from Ḥaurān, Southern Syria[*]

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Abstract

Presented here is a collection of six newly discovered Nabataean inscriptions from four sites in Ḥaurān: Dayr Al-Mašqūq, Mayamās, ʿAyn Umm ar-Rummān and Sahwat Al-Khaḍer. The significance of these new texts is that they contain new personal names that have not previously been found in any of the published Nabataean inscriptions. Additionally, they contain some hints relating to the Nabataean religion as well. An overview of the texts is provided along with readings, translations, and a brief commentary.

Keywords

Nabataean inscriptions, Nabataean Ḥaurān, the Nabataeans in southern Syria, Nabataean religion.

Among the many valuable sources of information about the Nabataean presence in the Ḥaurān region, epigraphic evidence is the most significant. In this part of Nabataea, over 150 Nabataean texts have been discovered. Most of these inscriptions were discovered during the Princeton expedition to Syria at the beginning of the twentieth century.[1] Since then, several inscriptions have been recorded from a number of sites in northern and southern Syria, resulting in an immense increase in published texts,[2] and these include funerary, architectural, dedicatory, honorary, and memorial texts.

This paper presents six new additional texts discovered at four sites in the Ḥaurān and these are: Dayr Al-Mašqūq, Mayamās, ʿAyn Umm ar-Rummān and Sahwat Al-Khaḍer. The photographs of the texts were sent to us by friends for identification. As a result, the authors could only study the text based on photos, some of which are not entirely helpful. Additionally, no measurements or descriptive information has been provided. Regardless, all of the texts have been read with certainty.
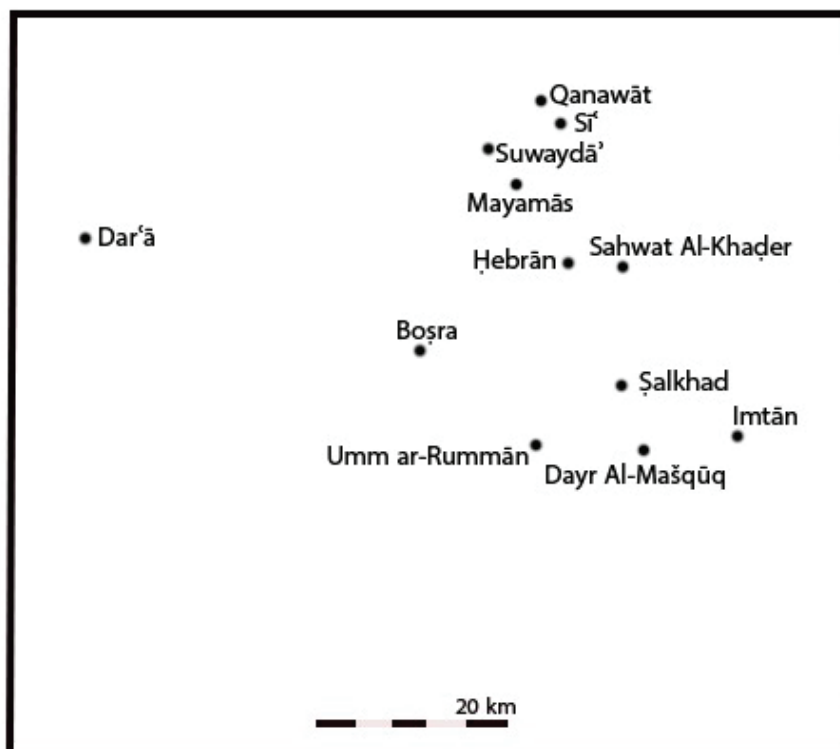

Fig. 1. Map of Ḥaurān.

Inscription 1

This text, which is incised on a basalt stone, was found in Dayr Al-Mašqūq, a village that is located at an altitude of 1250 meters above sea level. A large group of Nabataean villages surrounds the site: to the north is Ṣalkhad, about 6 kilometers away; and to the east, about 10 kilometers away, is Imtān (Nabataean *mtnw*). Several archaeological remains dating to the Nabataean period have been discovered there.[3]

Transliteration

1) *ṭlyt*
2) *brt*
3) *ʿbdʾš*

Translation

1) *ṭylt*
2) daughter of
3) *ʿbdʾš*

Fig. 2. Photograph of inscription 1.

Fig. 3. Drawing of inscription 1.

Commentary

A funerary stele placed on top of a female's tomb. Littmann concluded from his study of the tops of the funerary stelae of the Greek and Nabataean cultures within the Ḥaurān region that their shapes are indicators of gender. He concluded that females' stelae typically have rounded tops, whereas those of the males typically have square angular tops.[4] Despite being true for most of the funerary stelae found in the Ḥaurān region, this inscribed stone is an exception. Other similar inscribed stones with square tops mentioning females have also been found in the region.[5]

The very legible inscription contains two names that are attested for the first time in Nabataean. First is name *ṭlyt*, which originated from the word *ṭly* that is attested in other Semitic languages meaning 'young man, boy'.[6] The corresponding Greek name Ταλιτα is attested in Greek inscriptions from the Levant.[7] *Ṭly*=Ṭally/Ṭallayu is also described as the daughter of Baʿal in Ugaritic texts.[8]

There is a bilingual Nabataean-Greek text found in Petra that deserves special mention in this context. Bowersock published the text, reading the Nabataean part as *[h]grw slyṭʾ*. The shape of the letters clearly indicates that the second word is *ṭlytʾ*, which means 'the young girl'. The Greek equivalent is missing from the Greek part.[9] The word is similar to the Aramaic and Targumic words טַלְיְתָא and טלייה which mean 'young girl'[10] and the Syriac word ܛܠܝܘܬܐ that means 'childhood, youth'.[11]

The word *ṭlyt* appears in the New Testament.[12] Jesus took a young girl by hand and said to her deceased body, '*Talitha cumi*', the equivalent to Aramaic טליתא קומי which means, 'Little girl, arise'.

The new second name in the inscription is *ʿbdʾš*. It is made up of two parts, *ʿbd* and *ʾš*, and is similar

to the Arabic name Abd ʾAws. The second part may be an abbreviation of the name ʾwšw which is attested in Nabataean.[13] It should not be compared with the Nabataean name ʿbdʾysy[14] because it is not written here with *samekh*. The name appears as ʿbdʾs in Safaitic,[15] Thamudic[16] and Dadanite inscriptions.[17]

Inscription 2

This text was found in Dayr Al-Mašqūq. Its letters, which are clearly written, resemble those of inscription 1. It reads as follows:

Transliteration

1) ʾbydw
2) br ymlk
3) ʿbd ʾwnʾ

Translation

1) ʾbydw
2) son of *ymlk*
3) built this resting/sitting place?
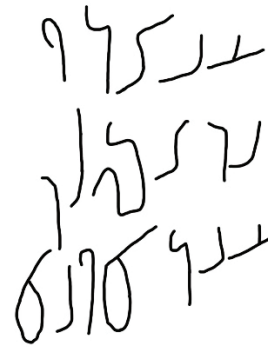

Fig. 4. Photograph of inscription 2.

Fig. 5. Drawing of inscription 2.

Commentary

The inscription begins with the name ʾbydw which means 'little servant'. It is well-attested in Nabataean,[18] Palmyrene,[19] and Hatran.[20] In addition to this, it appears as ʿbyd in Ancient North Arabian inscriptions.[21]

The second name *ymlk*, which means 'shall cause to rule', is attested in Nabataean,[22] Aramaic[23] as well as the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions.[24] Additionally, it appears as *ymlk* and *ymlkw* in Hatran[25] and Palmyrene texts.[26] The Greek name Ιαμμλιχος is equally well-attested.[27]

ʿbd: 'made, constructed'. This verb frequently occurs in Nabataean Aramaic, Hebrew, Palmyrene and Hatran inscriptions.[28]

The word ʾwnʾ, which is suffixed with the grapheme ʾaleph, is a noun in the masculine singular emphatic form. This word is found in an inscription inscribed on one of the Nabataean rock-cut facades in Ḥegrā.[29] Here, it follows the word kprʾ, which means 'the tomb'. It has been proposed earlier that the word ʾwnʾ refers to a sarcophagus, or one of the structures of a tomb.[30] The word was translated by Healey as dwelling. He compared it to the Jewish Aramaic and the Syriac word for dwelling, concluding that it originated from Iran.[31] Al-Theeb, on the other hand, relates the word to the Arabic word for serenity and

calmness and concludes that it simply refers to the courtyard in front of the façade.[32]

This argument is not convincing since all the architectural parts, installations, and courtyards associated with the Nabataean tomb are clearly mentioned in the Turkmāniyyh inscription in Petra.[33] These do not include the word ʾwnʾ.

In Palmyrene inscriptions, the word is translated as 'sarcophagus'.[34] The word is known in Syriac: ܐܘܿܢܵܐ and ܐܘܿܘܿܢܵܐ 'lodging, an inn, a mansion, and an inn'.[35] The words אֵינָא and אֶוְוָנָא in Targumic literature have the same Syriac meaning.[36]

Inscription 3

This inscription was found in the village of Mayamās, 20 kilometers to the southeast of the city of Suwaydāʾ at 1450 meters above sea level. It is located between two other Nabataean sites that used to include major Nabataean temples: the village of Ḥebrān where inscriptions show the existence of a central temple to the goddess Allāt and Saḥwat Al-Khaḍer where *Baʿalšamīn* was worshipped. A classical religious complex was found in Mayamās consisting of two huge buildings mentioned by researcher Butler, who visited Syria on a mission from Princeton University at the beginning of the last century.[37]

This inscription is broken, and both its beginning and end are missing.

Transliteration

...šmšy drḥm lʾtrʾt....

Translation

… Shamshai, lover of this place t….

Fig. 6. Photograph of inscription 3.

Fig. 7. Drawing of inscription 3.

Commentary

The form of the letters is typically Nabataean except for the letters *šin* and *ḥēṯ*. The letter *šin* closely resembles the shape of this letter in Aramaic, especially Palmyrene. It appears only in few Nabataean texts from *Sīʿ*.[38] The shape of the *ḥēṯ,* on the other hand, is strange, and according to our knowledge, no parallels of this letter are found elsewhere.

The personal name *šmšy* is attested in the published Nabataean inscriptions as *šmš* and *šmšw*.[39] It is also attested in the Nabataean theophoric names including *šmšʾlbʿly* and *šmšgrm*.[40] The name is attested in an Aramaic text from the eighth century BCE,[41] and it is also found in a Palmyrene inscription from Dura-Europos. It is composed from the name of the sun god Shamash. The name is common in Safaitic inscriptions and the equivalent of the name in Greek inscriptions is Σαμσαιος.[42] Additionally, it occurs as *šmšy* in Hatran[43] and *šms* in Ancient North Arabian inscriptions.[44] The Semitic name appears to be represented in the Greek name Σαμασαιος which occurs in Greek inscriptions from the Levant.[45]

According to the Assyrian chronicles, Samsi/Šamsi was an Arab queen who ruled in northern Arabia in the eighth century BCE.[46]

d rḥm 'the lover, who loves'. *d* is an abbreviated form of *dy*, a well-known relative pronoun meaning 'which, who'. The word *rḥm* 'lover' is also well attested in Nabataean.

The word *ʾtrʾ* 'the place', which is suffixed with the grapheme *ʾaleph*, is a noun in the masculine singular emphatic form. It is found in some Nabataean texts found in Ḥegrā.[47] The word is similar to the Aramaic and Targumic word אַתְרָא which means 'place, town'[48] and the Syriac word ܐܰܬ݂ܪܳܐ that means 'place, region, district, country'.[49]

Inscription 4

This text is from the village of Sahwat al-Khaḍer, which is located 25 kilometers to southeast of the city of Suwaydāʾ and rises 1700 meters above sea level. Named after the Islamic shrine of al-Khader, the site was formerly a temple dedicated to the Nabataean god *Baʿalšamīn*, which became a church named after Saint George. According to Butler, there was a Nabataean structure there, probably a temple or shrine.[50]

Transliteration

..(d)ʾ bny yrḥmgn br ʾkrmw lbʿšmyn

Translation

..(this which) *yrḥmgn* son of *ʾkrmw* built for *Baʿalšamīn*
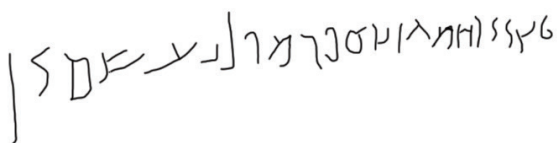

Fig. 8. Photograph of inscription 4.

Fig. 9. Drawing of inscription 4.

Commentary

The beginning of the text is missing, and the first visible letter is *ʾaleph,* probably the end of *dʾ* 'this'. Then comes *bny*, a word commonly used, in Nabataean and other Semitic languages, as a verb meaning 'built'.[51] This verb is followed by the name *yrḥmgn*, which is not attested previously in Nabataean. This name is a combination of the words *yrḥm* and *gn*. Names derived from the root *rḥm* are attested in Nabataean and these include *rḥymbʿl*, *rḥmh* and *rḥmy*.[52]

yrḥm may be compared with the Biblical name יְרֹחָם Yeroḥam (Jeroham), which was given to various male figures, including the paternal grandfather of the prophet Samuel.[53] The second part of the name is *gn*. Accordingly, the name may be translated as 'may *gn* has shown mercy'.

As far as we know, this is the second occurrence of the word *gn* in Nabataean. The word *gnyʾ* is found in a memorial inscription from Umm Jadhāyidh in northern Arabia, which mentions *ʾlh gnyʾ*. Al-Theeb interpreted this word as referring to the 'god of joy and happiness' and associated him with the Palmyrene *gnyʾ*.[54] Nehmé preferred to read this phrase as 'the god of Gaia', the god of modern day Wādī Mūsā near Petra.[55] Depending on the form of the letters, the authors support al-Theeb's reading and prefer to align the word with the Jinn cults.

Jinn cult was known in Palmyra. Teixidor concluded that the Arab gods of Palmyra are frequently styled like the Arabic deity *jinn*, which was the tutelary god *gnyʾ* in Palmyrene texts.[56] This argument is supported by Drijvers.[57] Another evidence is found in Hatra, where the name of the goddess *gnytʾ* is attested.[58]

Unlike the Palmyrene and Hatran texts, Nabataean texts do not provide much information

about the Jinn cult. In addition to the use of the personal name *yrḥmgn*, and the occurrence of the word *gnyʾ* in a text from Umm Jadhāyidh, another epigraphic hint may be linked with the Jinn cult in Nabataea. The name of the god *ʾšr* is mentioned once in a Nabataean inscription found in Dayr al-Mašqūq. According to Littmann's reading, this text mentions a certain *mʿyrw* who built *ḥmnʾ* in *bt ʾšdw ʾlhʾ* 'the house of ʾAsad(?), the god'.[59] The reading of the word *ʾšdw* in this text is doubtful, since it is followed by the word *ʾlhʾ* 'the god'. Due to the close similarity between the shapes of the letters *dālath* and *rēš,* and we argue that the letter *dālath* should be read as *rēš*. As a result, the correct reading of this name would be *ʾšrw*. This is supported by the presence of the name of this god in Palmyrene inscriptions and his association with the *Jinn* (see for example *ʾšr gnyʾ*),[60] and the occurrence of the name of this deity in Hatran theophoric names such as *ʿbdʾšr* and *ntnwʾšr*.[61]

Arabs were known for worshipping *Jinn* before Islam. The Holy Quran refers to this in its verses, 'they rather used to worship the jinn. Most of them believe in them'.[62] Ibn al-Kalbī mentions that Banū Muleiḥ of Ḥuzāʿah were among the tribes who worshipped the *Jinn*.[63] Furthermore, Arabs in pre-Islamic times knew of the name ʿAbd al-Jinn, which means 'the servant of the *Jinn*'.

Arabs believe that *Jinn* are hidden forces that control their lives and destiny. As they thought they live in mountains, trees and valleys, Arabs consequently developed a relationship with all the components of nature around them. According to them, *Jinn* are associated with death and life, as well as with disease and healing. Thus, they approached them with desire and awe, and sanctified everything related to them.[64]

In his book *Kitāb al-ḥaīyūān*, Al-Jāḥiẓ frequently speaks about the *Jinn* and says that they contact people, talk to them, marry them and give birth to them, and that Arabs believed that the *Jinn* are tribes and clans that might engage in conflict with humans.[65]

According to the available evidence, it appears that the *Jinn* cult was widely practiced by the pre-Islamic Arabs, including the Nabataeans. However, Nabataean practices of this cult are not entirely known.

The second name in the text is *ʾkrmw* attested previously in another form in Nabataean *ʾkrmh*.[66] It is derived from the word *krm* 'generosity' that is attested also as a personal name in Nabataean.[67] The North Arabian equivalent of the name is *ʾkrm* which is attested in some Hismaic inscriptions.[68]

lbʿšmyn 'for *Baʿalšamīn*', a god worshipped in various Nabataean sites including Ḥaurān, Wādī Mūsa, Wādī Rum and *šrtʾ* in southern Jordan.[69]

Baʿalšamīn's cult flourished in the northern part of Nabataea. In this region, his name appears in Nabataean cultic dedications. An inscription from Simj in Ḥaurān commemorates a dedication made by the tribe of *qṣyw* to *Baʿalšamīn*.[70] Another text from Boṣra mentions the dedication of *msgdʾ* to this god.[71] Further epigraphic evidence is found in Ṣalkhad commemorating the dedication of *msgdʾ* to *Baʿalšamīn*, the god of *mtnw*.[72] In al-Mṣayfra, an inscription records the construction of *ḥmnʾ* to him too.[73] The last epigraphic example from the Ḥaurān associated with *Baʿalšamīn* comes from *Sīʿ*, where the Nabataeans built a temple for him.[74] These texts strongly confirm that *Baʿalšamīn* was a major god in the Ḥaurān region.

Inscription 5

This inscription was found in Dayr al-Mašqūq. It consists of three lines and could be read as follows:

Transliteration

> *dʾ npš*
>
> *mškw*
>
> *br ʿnmw*

Translation

> This is the funerary monument of
>
> *mškw*
>
> son of *ʿnmw*

Fig. 10. Photograph of inscription 5.

Fig. 11. Drawing of inscription 5.

Commentary

The demonstrative pronoun *dʾ* 'this' is common in Nabataean and does not need any further comments here.

npš means 'funerary monument'. The word is used in the Ḥaurānite inscriptions to 'refer to any grave marker bearing the name of the deceased, whether in the form of a simple stela or the lintel over the entrance to the tomb'.[75] A discussion of the derivation and possible meanings of this word can be found in Nehmé 2010.

Mškw is one of the most common names in the Nabataean inscriptions of the Ḥaurān.[76] The Greek equivalent of the name, Μασεχος, appears in a bilingual text (Nabataean-Greek) inscribed on an altar from Umm al-Jimāl.[77] Names derived from the root *msk* are well-attested in Ancient North Arabian texts.[78]

Despite the missing bottom of the last line, the visible part could be read as *br ʿnmw*. The name is discussed below (inscription 6).

Inscription 6

This inscription was found in ʿAyn Umm ar-Rummān, which is located in the far south of the Suwaydāʾ Governorate near the Jordanian border. Although the inscription is partially defaced, we were able to read and draw it.

Transliteration

> *ʿnmw*
>
> *br šʿd*
>
> *ʾlhy*

Translation

> *ʿnmw* son of *šʿd ʾlhy*

Fig. 12. Photograph of inscription 6.

Fig. 13. Drawing of inscription 6.

Commentary

The name *ʿnmw* is particularly common in Nabataean[79] and Palmyrene inscriptions.[80] The Arabic equivalent of the name appears in Ancient North Arabian inscriptions as *ġnm* 'Ghānim'.[81] The equivalent Greek name Ανεμος appears in Greek inscription the Levant.[82]

The second name, *šʿd ʾlhy*, appears frequently in Nabataean inscriptions throughout the Kingdom.[83] It appears in Ancient North Arabian inscriptions as

šʿd ʾlt.[84] The Semitic name is to be associated with the Greek name Σαδαλος, which occurs frequently in inscriptions from the Levant.[85]

Conclusion

This paper presented six new unpublished Nabataean inscriptions found in the Ḥaurān region by some of our friends, and these represent a significant addition to the existing corpus of Nabataean inscriptions from southern Syria. Linguistic analysis of the texts, vocabulary, and proper names were included in the paper.

As previously mentioned above, the discussion included the following names that have not previously been published in Nabataean texts: *ṭlyt*, *ʿbd ʾš*, *yrḥmgn* and *ʾkrmw*. It has been confirmed in one of the studied texts that *Baʿalšamīn* was worshipped in Sahwat al-Khaḍer. The use of the name *yrḥmgn* may indicate to the Nabataean knowledge or belief in the *Jinn* cult.

In spite of the difficulty in pinpointing the precise date of these undated texts, impressions of the paleographies suggest they were written during the first two centuries CE.

Endnotes

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