

Two Old South Arabian Inscriptions: Early and Late

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Over the years, Professor Abdel Moneim A.H. Sayed and I have shared our interests in the mysterious ancient cultures and civilizations on both sides of the Red Sea: in Punt, in the Horn of Africa (broadly speaking), whence the resourceful ancient Egyptians obtained all across precious goods by trade with its people, notably aromatics, rare timbers and gold through the centuries; and in Ancient South Arabia, with its astonishing civilizations based on the Kingdoms of Saba, Ma'in, Qataban and Hadramaut and lesser entities, with their pioneering irrigation-agriculture and fabled trade, again in the aromatics so eagerly sought by other peoples in the Near East and around the East Mediterranean across many centuries.

Through the course of recent years, my interest in Ancient Arabia has brought me into contact not only with many interesting people of the present day, but also with quite a series of ancient inscriptions from all these ancient Kingdoms. So, it is a very special pleasure here to share with my good friend Prof. Abdel Moneim (and all our readers) two texts from ancient proto-Ma'in and from Qataban, both previously unpublished.

Figure (1), a Libation-table from ancient Haram, in the later Kingdom of Ma'in. This piece (UPC 117 in my reference files) is a rectangular (possibly alabaster) libation-table, height 19 cm (7.5"), length 38.9 cm (15.3"), width *c.* 28 cm (*c.* 11.25"). The rear is rough and without decoration; hence, in its original setting, this piece was positioned against a wall. A bull-head so heavily stylized as to be almost an abstract sculpture project from the upper front. Flanking this, and along

both sides, the upper two-thirds of its vertical surface bears a décor of four incised horizontal strips over a row of rectangular denticles, all placed in turn above three additional strips and a second row of such denticles. On each side, a pair of vertical incised lines cuts these panels into three equal lots (two equal lots flank the front head). All round the right side, front and left side, from right to left, runs a well-engraved text along the bottom third of the block, which reads thus:

(Right) 'b - w k l / b n / ' b - ' n s / s³ (Front) l ' / ' t
t r / b ' s n / y <h?> r (Left) ' b / b - y w m / S m h - ' m r.

(Right) "Ab-wakil, the son of Ab-anas, dedi- (Front) cated (this item) to 'Athtar Ba'san (= the Brave (?)), (when) he <made> an (Left) agreement/contract, in the time of Sumhu-amir."

The deity to whom this monument is dedicated was based in the city (and city-State) of Haram, in the later land and Kingdom of Ma'in, lying north of Saba (Sheba) in Yemen, and is invoked on numerous monuments found at Haram (now the ruins of Kharibat Hamdan/Al-Ali). In 8th to 6th centuries BCE, it had its own line of local kings, *c.* 750–600 BCE, then in the 3rd/2nd centuries, also becoming part of Ma'in until its eclipse and absorption into Saba. The dateline indicates that Sumhu-amir was a king; but he is not a ruler previously known for either Haram or Ma'in (although the two elements Sumhu and amir are known in both local and Minean royal names, but not in conjunction as here). The script is very regular, angular and plain (no serifs; *n* has proper rectangular

angles; the *m* is of two clear and equal triangles, almost no convexities, rounded top for *h*, etc.). This would indicate a date closer to *c.* 650–500 BCE, in the time of the Kingdom of Haram, of which this piece would be witness to a ‘new’ local king for this period. The regular, geometric décor is of typical Old South Arabian elements at most times.

The personal name *Ab-anas* is common in several dialects, occurring in Minean¹ and Qatabanian² as well as in Sabaean as here. By contrast, the name of his son *Ab-wakil* appears to be new, although the element *wakil* is attested in other name-forms.³

The epithet of the deity Athtar (*ba’san*) is peculiar to the inscriptions from Haram;⁴ but later scholars (such as Robin) are shy of attributing a particular meaning to the word at present.

The word *yr’b* presents a problem as written. The simple Perfective and Imperfective forms are (so far...) not seen to be used with this verb. It is usually used in the *hiph’il* form, and so one would expect the form *ybr’b* here. If one assumes an accidental omission, then we have the verb in its meaning of making an agreement or contract, as given above (and well attested elsewhere).⁵

Conclusion

This piece would have come from ancient Haram, and probably attests a ‘new’ King of Haram within (on palaeographic grounds) the late 7th to late 6th centuries BCE. It bears conventional décor, and is dedicated to the local deity of Haram, seemingly in celebration of its dedicator’s issuing a contract of some kind. It would have been set up against a wall, either in the dedicator’s house or in a local temple, for periodic libations to Athtar B, *A Bronze Dedication Plaque from Qataban*.

This piece (UPC 116 in my files) bears an inscription in eight lines, is wrought in relief,

and is written in the Qatabanian language of Old South Arabia. It is about 12.7” (32.3 cm) high, and approximately 16.7” (42.3 cm) long. The text is well preserved, except for the beginnings of lines 1–4 and most of line 8. As commonly with other such plaques, it has a flat border in relief around the text; five rectangular denticles project downward from the upper bar of this frame. Subject to the limitations of preservation above noted, one may decipher most of the text as follows:

(1) *Í y · m / b r n † m / w - Ī - n y † m / s q n y / Ó w k m - w /* (2) *[?] n b(?) y / w - ‘ l h y / b y t n / b ‘ n / β l m n / w - s q n y* (3) *‘ n b y / ‘ g n / j f t / Ó w k m / w - ‘ l h y - s w w / b - q d m w /* (4) *[f?] n / {t} ‘ (?) m n / l ‘ ‘ r Δ m / t k r b s / w - b - / w f y / b n - s* (5) *w w / Y ; r ‘ - ‘ l / w - I w b / w - / k r - ‘ l / w - ‘ Δ l β / r t d /* (6) *Ó w k m / w - ‘ l h y - s w w / ‘ f n - s / w - b n - s w w / Y ; r* (7) *· - ‘ l / w - I w b / w - / k r - ‘ l / w - ‘ Δ l β / w - b n y - s m / w - ? (?)* (8) *k(?) l / w - k l / f n ‘ ? / m s?? [/ - /] b n y / ‘ f n / ... n / m s [...] h y m / / - / .*

Then attempt to render it thus:

(1) Sayhum Barnatum, and Dhu-nayatum, has dedicated (to the gods) Hawkum and (2) [A] nbay(?) and (to) the gods of this house Shib’an, this statue. And he has dedicated (it also? to) (3) [A]nbay according as he promised to Hawkum and his gods previously, (4) [this?] by reason of the orders that he undertook, and (in return) for the well-being of his (5) sons: Yashrah-il, and Thawb, and Shikar-il, and Akhlus. He has entrusted (to) (6) Hawkum and his gods his household(?) and his sons: Yashra (7) h-il, and Thawb and Shikar-il and Akhlus, and their sons, ... (8) (*most of this line is too disjointed in readings at present to make sense without direct collation*).

Of all the family names given here, by far the rarest and most remarkable is the seeming surname of Sayhum, author of this piece: Barnatum.⁶ It recurs in two other Qatabanian inscriptions. One from

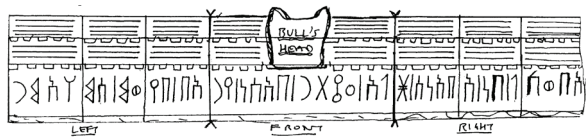
Kohlan, the ancient Timna, capital of Qataban, RES 3566;⁷ is a royal decree by Shahr Yagul Yuhargib III, King of Qataban probably *c.* 40/50 CE; at the end (in line 34), one of the innumerable witnesses to it is a Maadikarib son of Barnatum. The other, Ja[mme] 349 (refs., Kitchen, 268 end), is a modest dedication by one Dhakarum son of Barnatum to the god Anbay for his help, and entrusting his household(?), child(ren) and property to him, in wording not dissimilar to lines 5–6 of our piece. Ja 349 comes from Heid bin Aqil, the vast cemetery of Timna. Both this item and our piece may well be datable to the period of the first century BCE through into the first century CE, on palaeographical grounds, and so of similar date to RES 3566 under Shahr Yugal Yuhargib III of the mid-first century CE. It is not clear whether the Maadikarib and Dhakarum, ‘sons’ of Barnatum, are directly related to our man Sayhum Barnatum; it is certainly possible.⁸

The gods Hawkum, and especially Anbay, are well-attested members of the Qatabanian pantheon;⁹ (Anbay) and 510 (Hawkum).

An interesting piece, it most likely originates from ancient Timna, capital of Qataban, now Kohlan, probably from the house “Shib^can” in that venerable city.

Notes

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 1 S.F. Al-Said, *Die Personennamen in der Minäischen Inschriften* (Wiesbaden, 1995), 17, 53.
 2 H. Hayajneh, *Die Personennamen in der Qatabanischen Inschriften* (Hildesheim, 1998), 53.
 3 Examples, in G.L. Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names* (Toronto, 1971), 648-649.
 4 The rendering “the Brave” or similar goes back to M. Höfner, ‘Götter und Mythen im Vorderen Orient’, in H.W. Haussig (ed.), *Wörterbuch der Mythologie I* (Stuttgart, 1965), 489.



(Fig. 1) Libation-table from ancient Haram.



(Fig. 2) Bronze plaque from Qataban (possibly from Timna).

5 Refs., J.C. Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic* (Harvard, 1982), 473; A.F.L. Beeston *et al.*, *Sabaic Dictionary* (Louvain/Beirut, 1982), 112.
 6 Discussed by Hayajneh, *Die Personennamen in den Qatabanischen Inschriften*, 97.
 7 Refs, K.A. Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, vol II (Liverpool, 2000), 472.
 8 The name Sayhum is noted by Harding, *An Index*, 379; likewise (and as Qatabanian), Yashrah-il (Harding, *An Index*, 671), Thawb (Harding, *An Index*, 149) and Shikar-il (Harding, *An Index* 354). For Akhlus, one may compare compounds with *khalas*, (Harding, *An Index*, 226).
 9 Cf. Höfner, in Haussig (ed.), *Wörterbuch der Mythologie I*, 496-497.