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# A new and unique Thamudic inscription from northeast Jordan

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# A new and unique Thamudic Inscription from northeast Jordan

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## Abstract

This article is an edition of an inscription in a variety of Thamudic that contains several glyph shapes that have not been found together in the same inscription, and are typical of inscriptions from central and southern Arabia. Interesting glyph shapes include the glyph shapes for *ʾ*, *w*, and *g*. A personal name formed on a morphologically H-Causative verb, familiar from the South Arabian, as well as Dadanitic inscriptions, is attested in this inscription. The formula found in the inscription is paralleled most closely by those typical of Thamudic C inscriptions. Finally, the article discusses the implications of the combination of these features, typically associated with different scripts and geographic distribution, for the field of ANA epigraphy.

**Keywords:** Ancient North Arabian; Thamudic

## 1 Introduction

The inscription under discussion was originally discovered by Geraldine King between Tell al-ʿAbid and Qāʿ Umm al-ʿUwāḡil in northeastern Jordan during the Basalt Desert Rescue Survey in 1989.<sup>1</sup> While short, the inscription is noteworthy for several reasons. First, whereas most of the inscriptions found in this region are composed in the Safaitic script, this inscription is written in a version of the North Arabian script that, while attesting glyph shapes found elsewhere in Thamudic inscriptions, does not fall into one of the established categories (see the script chart in Macdonald 2000: 34). Second, several of the glyph forms, as well as a personal name, are more typical of “Southern” Thamudic inscriptions, occurring rarely if at all in inscriptions this far north.

## 2 Transcription and Translation

*wlt ng*  
*ʾbṭlw/wdd/ʿmt bnt yhbkr*  
*ʿbṭlw loves ʿmt daughter of Yhkbr...O Lt, deliver!*

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<sup>1</sup>The Safaitic inscriptions below the drawing are KRS 2606-2608.

A THAMUDIC INSCRIPTION FROM NORTHEAST JORDAN



Figure 1: Inscription from between Tell al-‘Abid and Qā‘ Umm al-‘Uwāḡil, Jordan (Copyright Google Maps)



Figure 2: Photograph by M.C.A. Macdonald

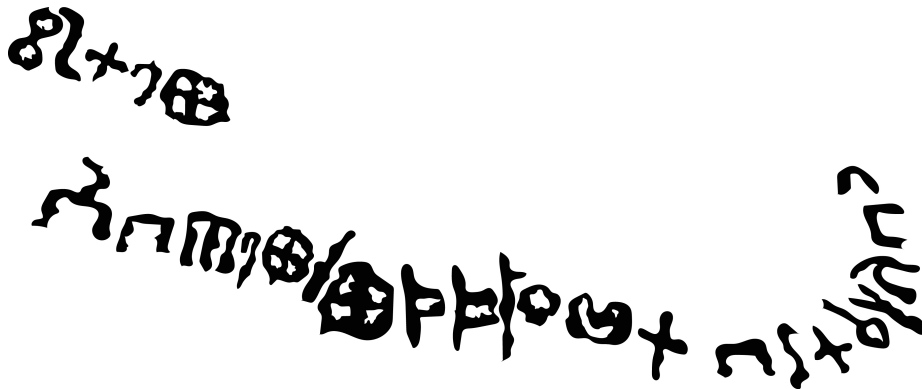


Figure 3: Tracing by A. Al-Jallad

The first portion of text is written together using word dividers, whereas the second portion is written above and to the left and no word dividers are present. It is difficult to determine whether the inscription represents one inscription or two. Indeed, such inscriptions raise interesting questions about the applicability of notions of textual unity when carved on rock. In any event, the *waw* glyph is identical in both, the hand and patina appear to be the same, and a fairly natural interpretation of the two together is forthcoming (see below), so I have read the two portions together.

### 3 Script

Three glyph shapes in this inscription deserve special comment.

ʿ - This glyph is very similar to the corresponding glyph in the ASA script, but in this text the arm branches out to the right and then back to the left like half of a diamond. This shape is foreign to Safaitic and Hismaic. Similar shapes are attested in what Macdonald (2000) has called “Dispersed North Arabian.” Virtually identical glyphs are attested in several Thamudic inscriptions from Ḥail (Winnett & Reed 1973: nos.14-15, 80), as well as in a few “Southern” Thamudic texts from Wadi Khushayba, near Najrān in Saudi Arabia (KhShB 234). It is also possible that the glyph represents *s*<sup>1</sup>, but as this shape for ʿ is attested elsewhere, and the name *s*<sup>1</sup>*btlw*<sup>2</sup> is as of yet unknown, a reading of ʿ is virtually assured.

*w* - The shape of this glyph is also noteworthy. The *w* in this text is written as a circle with a + intersecting it. A rectangular form with a + or x intersecting is attested in Thamudic B (Macdonald 2000); an exact parallel is found in a few inscriptions from Ḥail (Winnett & Reed 1973: nos. 43, 156; for a square variant, see *ibid*: nos. 43, 88).

*g/t* - This glyph is used to represent /*t*/ in the majority of the ANA scripts, but represents /*g*/ in Hismaic, as well as in Thamudic C (Al-Jallad 2016). It is of course possible to read the glyph as a /*t*/, which would produce the reading

<sup>2</sup>The name could be interpreted as an S-Causative from the root *√btl*, but the absence of any evidence for S-Causatives in the languages represented in the North Arabian scripts, as well as the attested shape of the ʿ in southern Thamudic inscriptions, makes the ʿ reading all but certain.

*w lt nt*. As the inscription ends with this glyph at the edge of the rock, and it is possible that the rock was broken here, this reading cannot be ruled out. However, there is no apparent damage to the rock, and reading the glyph as a /g/ produces a very sensible reading for which we have some parallels in other ANA inscriptions, as a D-stem imperative from the root √ngy, ‘to be saved, delivered’ (see discussion below).

The final /r/ of the name *yhkbr* faces toward the beginning of the inscription, which is the norm in Thamudic B inscriptions (see e.g., Winnett & Reed 1970: 207, no. 3).

Finally, the lower inscription is divided logically by means of vertical word dividers. As indicated in the transcription above, they occur between *’btlw* and *wdd*, and between *wdd* and *’mt bnt yhkbr*. The size and shape of the word dividers in this inscription resemble those found in ASA inscriptions, as well as the Dadanitic monumental inscriptions, but are much larger and longer than those typically found in the other ANA inscriptions, which are typically smaller marks resembling apostrophes (for further examples, mostly from Tayma’, but occasionally in scattered ‘Thamudic’ inscriptions in Arabia, see e.g., Winnett & Reed 1970: 222, no. 2).

## 4 Grammatical Features and Orthography

This inscription contains several interesting points of grammar that merit brief consideration. First, the name *’btlw* could reflect an elative form from the root √btl, probably “most heroic.” The final *w* could be interpreted as “wawation,” the suffixing of /ū/, usually to personal names and words for relatives (see Al-Jallad forthcoming, for discussion of this feature in context of early Arabic). In Nabataean, this feature is quite commonly attached to personal names (e.g., *mnkw*).<sup>3</sup> It is impossible to accurately determine the distribution of this morpheme in the languages attested in the north Arabian scripts given that most did not make use of *matres lectionis*.<sup>4</sup> The one exception to the non-representation of monophthongs is Dadanitic, where /ū/ and /ā/ are often represented word finally (/ū/ by *w*, and /ā/ by *h* - Macdonald 2004: 495; Sima 1999). Thus the representation of /ū/ with a *mater lectionis* here is intriguing. The representation of long vowels is common in middle and late Sabaic, as well as other ASA script traditions (Stein 2011: 1049). There was a Minaean trading colony at Dadan, and some Minaic inscriptions have been discovered there (Rossi 2014). The phenomenon at Dadan could potentially be connected to the Minaic scribal tradition. If the reading *’btlw* is correct, then such a practice in this inscription strongly suggests some kind of connection with a script tradition that utilized *matres lectionis*, at least word finally, although the exact source of influence is impossible to determine.

We may also interpret the final *w* glyph on personal names as a calque of the name from another script, the most likely candidate being Nabataean Aramaic.

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<sup>3</sup>Interestingly, *wawation* does not typically occur on elative forms in Nabataean, cf. the *’aşlah* inscription from Petra, *’şlh* instead of *’şlhw*; see however the same name with *wawation* in an inscription from Sinai in the Nabataean script, *’şlh*w (Healey 2009: 55; also Al-Khaysheh 1986: 42). I thank Ahmad Al-Jallad for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>4</sup>South Arabian names normally take *mimation* and thus do not show any evidence of this feature (Stein 2011, but cf. the deity name *’lmqhw* as a possible example of /ū/ on a deity name).

Possible examples can be found in Safaitic *mrw* (KRS 127) or *qymw*,<sup>5</sup> as well as Hismaic *krw* (HIn428) inscriptions. Calquing implies knowledge of multiple scripts among at least some of the authors of the ANA inscriptions. This is in fact already quite well established by a number of bilingual inscriptions, which are written in a variety of ANA script, as well as another language, frequently Greek, but also Palmyrene and Nabataean Aramaic (Macdonald 2009 II: 347; Hayajneh 2009).

Another possibility<sup>6</sup> is that *ʔbtlw* reflects a compound name made up *ʔb* ‘father’, and the root  $\sqrt{tlw}$  (cf. Arabic *talwun* ‘gazelle’; Lane:1876),<sup>7</sup> similar in form and meaning to *ʔabū Zabi*. It is also possible to read the second element of the compound as *hlw* (cf. Arabic *hulwun*, “(of a man) one who is excited to briskness, liveliness, or sprightliness,” Lane: 634), since the glyph read here as *t* represents *h* in a number of ANA inscriptions (most notably Safaitic, as well as Thamudic C and D). Compound names with the element *ʔb* are known well attested in ANA inscriptions (Harding 1971: 7-18).

The second word of the inscription, *wdd*, admits of several interpretations. It is possible that the form represents a G-stem verb, perhaps /wadida/ ‘he loved’ (cf. Arabic /wadda/ with the same meaning). This root is commonly found in Thamudic C, where some examples of PN *wdd* PN are attested, although it is not the usual formula (Tsafrir 1996: 143). Tsafrir follows Littmann in translating *wdd* as ‘to greet’; Winnett interprets it as a noun ‘love’ (vocalized /widād/ – Winnett 1937: 25). The root is attested in relatively clear contexts with the meaning ‘love’ in the Hismaic inscriptions (KJA 23.105) If the interpretation of a G-stem verb in this inscription is correct, it would imply that geminate verbs in the G-stem had not undergone metathesis, i.e.  $C_1aC_2vC_3 > C_1vC_2C_3(v)$  when  $C_2 = C_3$  in the language underlying this inscription. It is also possible to understand the verb here as a D-stem, /waddad(a)/. If the interpretation of *wdd* as a verb is correct, then the word order of the inscription is SVO, a word order found in Hismaic, Dadanitic and Taymanitic, but rarely ever in Safaitic (Al-Jallad 2015: 171ff.; Sima 1999). Given our limited understanding of the ‘Thamudic’ inscriptions, we must remain agnostic as regards word order.

It is also possible to interpret *wdd* as a substantive passive participle /wadid/ ‘beloved,’ in which case the text would be understood as *ʔbtlw*, beloved of ‘mt bnt yhkbr.’ The passive participle is found throughout the corpus of ANA inscriptions, and reading a participle here would produce an unremarkable syntax vis-à-vis the other ANA inscriptions. However, it would be quite unusual in the context of ANA and ASA inscriptions for a man to claim to be the beloved of a woman; rather, we would expect a man to declare that he loves a certain woman.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, we may interpret *wdd* as an active participle /wādid/. Depending on the aspectual significance of the participle in this variety, it could either be understood as ‘lover of ‘mt’ or ‘the one who has loved ‘mt.’ If this form represents an active participle then it would suggest that the /i/ vowel was not syncopated as has happened in some Arabic dialects (such as in Hawrani Arabic; see Behnstedt 1997: 384-385) and potentially attested in an unpublished

<sup>5</sup>From unpublished inscription discovered by members of the OCIANA Badia project, May 2015. The inscription will appear in the author’s upcoming Leiden University dissertation.

<sup>6</sup>I thank Jérôme Norris for this suggestion.

<sup>7</sup>Possibly attested in HIn 389

<sup>8</sup>I thank Michael C. A. Macdonald for this important point.

Safaitic inscription - *nq't b-wd d-hbl h-s'fr* 'may whosoever would efface this inscription be thrown out (of his grave) by one who loves (him)'.<sup>9</sup>

The second portion of text, which either represents a continuation of the same inscription or another by the same person (or perhaps an inscription by a different person in the same script), contains a brief petition to the goddess *lt* for deliverance, 'O *Lāt*, deliver!' The petition is introduced by the conjunction *w*. It is likely that the construction is an unmarked vocative phrase, 'O *Lāt*...'<sup>10</sup> The command *ng* is probably to be read as a D-stem imperative from the root  $\sqrt{\text{ngy}}$ , 'to deliver.'<sup>11</sup> If this interpretation is correct, and if the /w/ in *'btlw* is a *mater*, the absence of /y/ here could imply a short vowel, *naggi*. This root is found in Safaitic inscriptions, both with the meaning 'to be delivered, saved,' and 'to announce' (Macdonald 2014: 155-156). The closest parallels in the Safaitic corpus with this root are found in WH135, *lqny f h lt qbl 'hl s'lm f nngy*, which Al-Jallad translates 'By Qny so, O Lt, let there be reunion with (my) family that we/I may be saved' (Al-Jallad 2015: 284); also WH153, *l s'mt bn cbd bn gt bn s'rk bn s'krm w ngy m-hwlt f h lt s'lm l-d s'r w 'wr l-d y'wr h-s'f'rt*, 'By S'mt son of 'bd son of Gt son of S'rk son of S'krm and he escaped from the Hwlt so, O Lt, may he who would leave (this inscription) untouched have security but may he who would efface this writing go blind' (ibid: 284). Both *ngw* and *ngy* are attested in Sabaic, but only with the meaning 'to announce' (Stein 2012: 83).<sup>12</sup>

It is also possible to read the final glyph as a /t/, and the root  $\sqrt{\text{ntt}}$  is attested in the Arabic lexica with the meaning 'to exude (oil or liquid substance),' as well as, 'to spread, disperse (what was talked about)' (Lane: 2823). The root  $\sqrt{\text{ntw}}$  is also listed in several lexicons with the same meaning (Steingass 1884: 1101; Hava: 741). If we read the glyph as a /t/ instead of a /g/, then it is probably best to interpret the final portion as 'O *Lāt*, reveal/make known!'

## 5 Discussion

The co-occurrence of a number of interesting epigraphic, orthographic, and onomastic features in this inscription merits discussion. First, the name *yhkbr*

<sup>9</sup>It is possible, of course that the author here simply neglected to write the second *d* by mistake.

<sup>10</sup>An example from Safaitic provides a structural parallel to the present inscription: C1341 *w rdw 'wr m 'wr-h* 'and Rdw, blind whosoever would efface it.' Al-Jallad (2015: 176) cites this inscription as an example of an unmarked vocative, which precedes the request, which is often morphologically an imperative (as here). Similar constructions are found in the Qur'an, e.g. 10:88, *wa-qāla mūsā rabbanā 'innaka 'atayta fir'awna wa-mala'ahu zinatan wa-'amwālan* 'and Moses said: Our Lord, indeed you have given Pharaoh and his establishment splendor and wealth.' I thank Ahmad Al-Jallad for this reference.

<sup>11</sup>As argued recently in Macdonald (2014), there were probably two roots, *ngy* 'to be delivered' and *ngw* 'to announce' (the latter attested in Sabaic and Minaic – see Beeston et al. 1982: 93). Al-Jallad (2015: 331) has suggested that these roots were merged in Safaitic, leading to the ambiguity with which Macdonald (2014: 155-156) discusses. This verb meaning 'to be delivered' is attested in Arabic as *ngw*. If the arguments advanced by Macdonald and Al-Jallad are correct, that would suggest that root confusion led to Arabic *ngw* 'to be delivered' (though see below).

<sup>12</sup>Biella (1982: 292), following Beeston and Ryckmans, suggests that the nominal form *mngwn* be understood as 'satisfactory outcomes' or 'good fortune,' connected with religious practices to ensure protection from the evil eye. If true, the root  $\sqrt{\text{ngw}}$  could have, in some varieties, had the meaning of 'to be saved, delivered,' in which case perhaps both roots merged to  $\sqrt{\text{ngw}}$ , the opposite of Al-Jallad's suggestion for the Safaitic development. Indeed, if the root represents a loan, this could explain why Arabic has  $\sqrt{\text{ngw}}$  instead of  $\sqrt{\text{ngy}}$ .

alongside a basically south Arabian *alif* glyph could suggest some connection with southern Arabia and the script and writing traditions in use in the south. The name *yhkbr* presumably is morphologically a H-Stem imperfect from the root  $\sqrt{kbr}$ . In most of the languages represented in the north Arabian scripts, the C-stem shifted from /h/ to /ʔ/, whereas in Sabaic the C-stem is still /h/.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the H-stem causative is attested fairly frequently in the onomastica of south Arabian, e.g., *S<sup>2</sup>mr Yhr<sup>c</sup>s<sup>2</sup>*.

Second, the formula used here deviates from attested formulae in other Thamudic inscriptions. Ahmad Al-Jallad has recently advanced persuasive argumentation for connecting the transmission of *how* to write (i.e., knowledge of, and ability to use the script) with *what* to write about and how to write about it (Al-Jallad 2015: 2-10). He notes, for example, that the authors of inscriptions in the Safaitic script, with a few exceptions, wrote about certain topics using oft-repeated vocabulary and formulae, while the graffiti attested in the Hismaic script are by and large expressions of love using formulae and vocabulary rarely attested in the Safaitic inscriptions (Al-Jallad 2015: 6).

Most inscriptions in the various scripts labeled Thamudic are quite brief and enigmatic, and convincing interpretations of the precise meaning of the formulae used have so far been elusive. As noted above, a direct parallel to the formula attested in this inscription (PN + *wdd* + PN) is found in Thamudic C. Whether the precise meaning of *wdd* is ‘love’ (following Winnett) which I have adopted, or ‘greeting’ (following Littmann and Tsafrir), the parallel structure is clear. Unlike Thamudic C, however, this inscription contains a prayer (Divine Name + Impv) more reminiscent of those attested in Safaitic (see Al-Jallad 2015: 208ff. for examples). Thus a formula attested mostly in Thamudic C and a prayer most similar to those in Safaitic meet in an inscription that is neither.

Finally, the value /g/ for usual ANA /t/ is attested in the Hismaic inscriptions (King 1990: 19ff.; Macdonald 2000), and Thamudic C (Macdonald 2000: 34; Al-Jallad 2016). If the interpretation *ng* as a D-stem imperative from the root  $\sqrt{ngw}$  is correct, then this inscription furnishes evidence that such a realization may have been more widespread among the various scripts labelled ‘Thamudic.’

It is important to remember that ‘Thamudic’ as a script category is only a catch-all into which those scripts for which we lack sufficient attestation are placed. It is so far only negatively defined; that is, it stands in for the variety of ANA scripts that are not those for which we have ample attestation and convincing decipherment, such as Safaitic, Hismaic, Taymanitic, etc. The inscription under discussion is not written in the Safaitic or Hismaic script, nor is it in one of the scripts of the oases of north Arabia. We are thus forced to label it with the catch-all ‘Thamudic.’ The fact that this current inscription combines a number of elements not previously attested within the same inscription is thus natural and should serve as a reminder that current subdivisions of Thamudic (i.e., Thamudic B, C, D) are still only tentative and in need of further revision, modification or even replacement in light of new discoveries.

Though the variation in glyph shapes attested in this inscription is natural

<sup>13</sup>Fokelien Kootstra informs me (personal communication) that personal names in Dadanitic based on h-causative stems do occur (e.g., JSLih 125 *yhdkr*) though relatively infrequently. Thus we must be cautious of automatically assigning h-causatives as PNs with a South Arabian origin. However, the fact remains that this inscription is not written in the Dadanitic script, and, as discussed above, several glyphs are indicative of forms common in southern contexts.

given the lack of specificity inherent in the catch-all ‘Thamudic’ classification, the question of whether we can detect a connection with other script traditions remains. The *alif* glyph closely resembles the ASA glyph, and is attested in ‘Southern’ Thamudic as well as some Thamudic B inscriptions. Also, the PN *yhkbr* could suggest a connection with southern Arabia. Further, it is unlikely that the ANA scripts originally made use of *matres lectionis* to represent long vowels, thus, if the reading of the first name as *’bṭlw* is the correct reading, the use of the *w* glyph as a *mater lectionis* to represent /ū/ would connect the tradition standing behind this inscription with southern Arabia, or possibly Dadan.

The *w* glyphs resemble forms from ‘Thamudic’ texts found in central and southern Arabia. This shape, however, is not attested in the ASA script tradition, and could represent mixing of several south Arabian features (’ glyph, PN *yhkbr*, and the form of the word dividers) with two others attested (so far) in farther northwest, in NW Saudi Arabia and southern Jordan (*t* glyph representing /g/, /w/ glyph shape). We should note, however, that the combination of features attested in this script, while possibly representing a mixture of earlier traditions, cannot be considered a mixed script (for a general discussion, see Macdonald 1980: 188). Rather, what we have in this inscription is a heretofore unique combination of features that must remain unclassified (except for the somewhat unfortunate ‘Thamudic’ label) for now.

Aside from issues of script and orthography, the goddess *Lt*, a north Arabian goddess not found in the South Arabian pantheon, suggests a northern religious milieu for the author of this inscription. Perhaps the most intriguing thing about this inscription is its provenance, in the Syrian Desert among nomadic groups much farther north than where one might expect to find a script with these features. The presence of an inscription in a script that presents a unique combination of glyphs and formulae, but whose glyphs and orthography show clear connections with southern Arabia and central Arabia, illustrates that these scripts and writing traditions were transmitted and transported quite a distance from their likely origins.

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## Sigla

Hava	Hava (1899)
HIn	Harding (1971)
JSLih	Dadanitic inscriptions in Jaussen & Savignac (1909-1922)
KhShB	Thamudic Inscriptions from Wādī Khushayba in Kawatoko et al. (2005)
KJA	Inscriptions from Wādī Judayyid Site A in King (1990: 172-252)
KRS	Safaitic inscriptions recorded by G.M.H. King on the Basalt Desert Rescue Survey; published online in the OCIANA database.
Lane	Lane (1863-1893)

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