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Abdul-Qader al-Housan

Mafraq Antiquities Office and Museum, Jordan

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# An Islamic inscription from the Al-Mafraq Antiquities Office and Museum

Abdul-Qader al-Housan

(Mafraq Antiquities Office and Museum, Jordan)

## Abstract

The core goal of this paper is to bring to light and study the significance of a recently discovered Islamic inscription, found in the northeastern desert region of Jordan. This inscription has been placed in the care of the Al-Mafraq Antiquities Office and Museum for safekeeping and in order to protect its historic authenticity. The inscription itself has proved to be incredibly valuable as it provides further information on the climatic and environmental conditions during the 14th century AD.

**Keywords:** Islamic Arabic Inscription Jordan Weather Middle Arabic Graffiti

## 1 Introduction

The core goal of this paper is to bring to light and study the significance of a recently discovered Islamic inscription, found in the northeastern desert region of Jordan. This inscription has been placed in the care of the Al-Mafraq Antiquities Office and Museum for safekeeping and in order to protect its historic authenticity. The inscription itself has proved to be incredibly valuable as it provides further information on the climatic and environmental conditions during the 14th century AD.

Initially, the original stone was found near the sites Qā<sup>ʿ</sup> Ra<sup>ʿ</sup>d, an area that is situated approximately 34 km north-east of as-Safawi, formerly known as H5

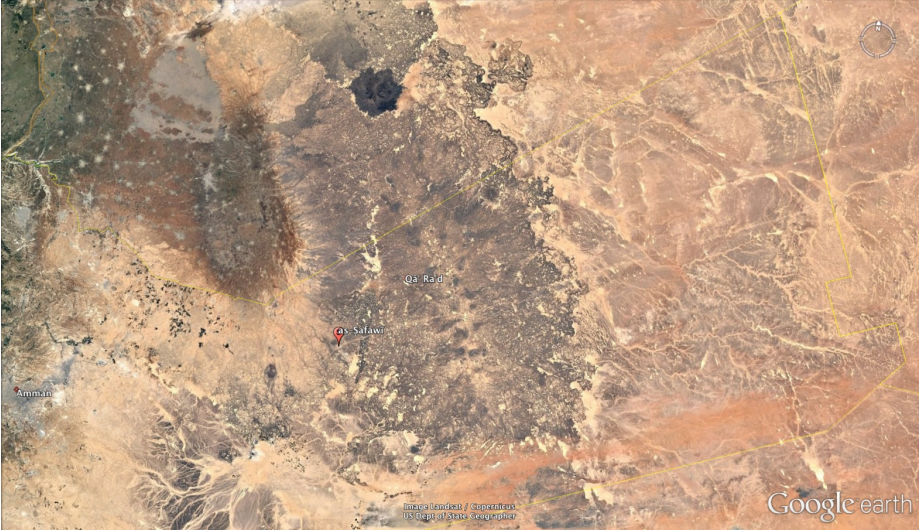


Figure 1: Map of Jordan showing the location of Qā' Ra'd (Source: Google Earth)

(see fig. 1). As previously mentioned, during 2016, I transferred the inscription from the location in which it was originally found to the Al-Mafraq Antiquities Office and Museum. In terms of its aesthetic qualities, the inscription can be seen to have been initially chiseled and engraved directly on the basalt stone segment using notably thin and sensitive strokes. This piece is written in Arabic and, in more specific terms, a fairly colloquial choice of language is seen to have been adopted throughout. In total, the inscription includes eleven lines of text and was transcribed using Naskh calligraphy.

## 2 The inscription

The inscription reads as follows:

1. بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ قَالَ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى وَرَزَقَكُمْ فِي السَّمَاءِ وَمَا تَوَعَدُونَ
2. جَمِيعَكُمْ يَأَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِنْ رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ
3. إِنَّ نَحْنَا نَحْبِسُ عَنَّا الْمَطْرَ حَتَّىٰ (كَذَا) مَظَا

4. من المربعانية ثمانية وعشرين وقل
5. الما على الناس في كل الغدور وملوا الناس
6. أموالهم من قله الما وطلبوا من الله الكريم فجابهم
7. وكان المطر ليلة الاثنين المباركة ا واغراقت
8. الأرض في الما المبارك اللهم اغفر لجماعة بن رجب الجشمي
9. ولمن قرا هذا الكتاب ولمن سلك هذا الطريق ولمن
10. قال امين رب العالمين وكتب سنة سبعين
11. وسبع مائه

1. In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful. Allah said: and in the sky is your (pl.) provision and that which you are promised.
2. All of you, O you who believe! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah.
3. It did not rain over us until
4. twenty-eight nights passed of Marba'niyah, and
5. the water lessened in the wells, and the people bought
6. water [due to water depletion], and asked Allah the Generous [to give them rain], Who responded [to their prayer].
7. It rained in the blessed night of Monday, and flooded
8. the ground with the blessed water. Oh Allah may you forgive Ġamā'ah son of Raġab Al-Ġašmī,
9. and those who read this inscription, and who travels along this road, and
10. who says Amen, Oh Lord of the worlds. Written in year
11. seven hundred and seventy.

### 3 Commentary

This particular inscription begins its narrative with the *basmala*, which is widely considered to have been common practice in Islamic inscriptions during the 8th century AH. However, in this instance, the *basmala* is engraved in a thin and



Figure 2: Photo of the inscription by A. Al-Housan

سَمِ اللّٰهُ الرَّحْمٰنَ الرَّحِیْمَ قَالَ اللّٰهُ تَعَالٰی زَرَقْتُمْ فِی السَّمَاوٰتِ نُوْعًا مِّنْ  
 جَهَنَّمَ اِیَّهَا الَّذِیْنَ اٰمَنُوا لَا تَقْطَعُوا مِنْ رِجْمِ اللّٰهِ  
 اَنْ تَحْمَا الْكَلْبَ عِنَّا الْمَطَرِ حَتّٰی مَطَا  
 مِنَ الرَّیْبَانِیَّةِ ثَمَانِیَّةٍ وَعِشْرِیْنِ لَیْلَةً وَقَالَ  
 الْبَاقِلِی النَّاسِ فِی كُلِّ الْخَدُوْدِ وَمَلَا النَّاسِ  
 اَمْوَالَهُمْ مِنْ قَلْبِ السَّمَاوٰتِ  
 وَكَانَ الْمَطَرُ لِنَهْلِ الْاَنْبِیِّ الْمُبَارِكِ  
 الْاَرْضِ فِی الْمَا الْمُبَارِكِ اللَّهُمَّ اَعْرِضْ جَمَاعَةَ رَحْمَتِ  
 وَلَمْ تَقْرَأْ هَذَا الْكِتَابَ وَلَمْ يَسْلُكْ هَذَا الطَّرِیْقَ وَلَمْ  
 قَالَ اَهْلُ دُبِّ الْعَالَمِیْنَ وَكَتَبَ  
 وَرَعَاهُ

Figure 3: Tracing of the inscription by A. Al-Housan

sensitive fashion which, in actuality, provides little contrast with the rest of the piece (Al-Salameen 2010: 75; Al-Sa‘id 2004: 85). Following this *basma-la*, the author then goes on to relay a verse from the Holy Quran (Ad-Dariyat 51:22). This verse reads “and in the sky is your provision and that which you are promised”. Yet, it is important to also note at this point that the original author of this text made a mistake and attempted to change the arrangement of the words in the verse. The author put the word provision, ورزقكم, before the word sky, السما. It could be the case that this was due to a faulty recollection of Quranic verses, which is a feature commonly found in inscriptions originating in the Jordanian desert regions. Compare the following inscription, in which the author has, once again, misquoted the wording of scripture and attempted to alter the arrangement of words and phrases relating to the prophets (Al-Jbour 2001: 675; Al-Jbour 2006: no. 91):

1. الله كلم موسى تكليما
2. واتخذ إبراهيم خليلا
3. إذ قال موسى رب أرني
4. كيف تحيي الموتى وكتب
5. دجاجة ابن اسلم يوم
6. الجمعة

1. Allah spoke to Musa by words
2. and took Ibrahim as a friend.
3. When Musa said: “Show me, Lord,
4. how You will raise the dead”. And wrote
5. Duğāğah son of Aslam, Fri-
6. day.

According to the Holy Quran, it was Ibrahim that initially asked Allah to show him His abilities of giving life to the dead, not Musa.

However, in the inscription in question, the original author of the text included the word ‘all’ which is not derived from the original text of this verse. Furthermore, the author then goes on to add the phrase ‘all you believers’ which is also not found in any part of the Quranic verse (Az-Zumr 39:53) entitled ‘Despair not of the Mercy of Allah’. Therefore, it remains evident that



Figure 4: Photo of the inscription by A. Al-Housan

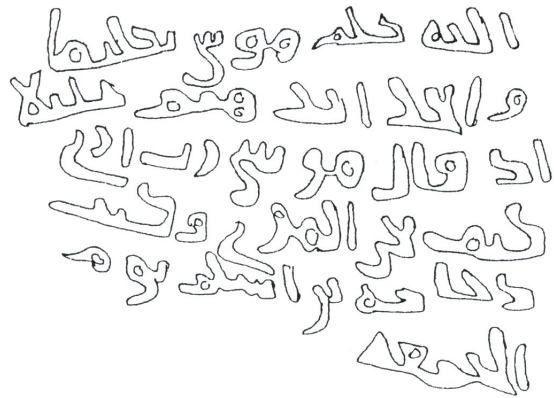


Figure 5: Tracing of the inscription by A. Al-Housan

these mistakes highlight an issue with the author's memorisation of Quranic verses, as it is clear that they relied on memory to quote the scriptures.

Other than citing religious scripture, the author also goes on to state that there was no rainfall in the area for a total of 28 nights in Marba'niyah. This period is usually considered to be both the coldest and rainiest period of winter for nomads. The fact that there was no recorded rainfall for such a significant stretch of time would have been such an unfamiliar occasion for the author that he decided to date the inscription with it. Here, the author also describes how water became so dangerously scarce that ponds and wells dried up and people began to bargain and buy water for increasingly higher fees. Further historical evidence and research suggests that the price of one litre of water during this period would have, at points, potentially reached 12 dirhams (Bani Hamd 2008: 290).

The term *Marba'niyah* was originally derived from the word أربعون 'forty', because it was initially believed to stretch for 40 days in winter. Mostly this word was and is still used in Jordan and Syria. It started on the 22nd of December until the 31st of January. The author says that for the first 28 days of the Marba'niyah, there was no rain. This could mean that the rain began on Monday 22 January 1369 AD (19 Jumadah al-thani 770 AH).

The author of this inscription is Ğamā'ah son of Raġab Al-Ğašmī. Since the discovery of this piece, various other stone inscriptions signed by him have also been found. Ğamā'ah son of Raġab Al-Ğašmī also adopted the name 'Al-Khatīb' in some inscriptions as well, which may have been related to his job or field of work. Additionally, across other pieces, he refers to himself as 'Al-Kūfi', which could be a comment on his clear proficiency in Kufic calligraphy and technique (see Al-Housan 2008: 410). Finally, at the very end of the inscription, the writer asks for Allah to forgive any travellers who read the text or travel along the road by which it was placed, with a final engraving that reads the date 770 AH.

## 4 Discussion

Despite the significance of this inscription, it is important to acknowledge that this piece was found in an area where many other Islamic inscriptions dating back to the same period have since been found. When analysed as complete

sets, almost all of these inscriptions describe and indicate that there was a spike in the price of wheat during the 8th century AH. It is believed that lack of rain significantly contributed to this inflation in price as many historical sources from the time have mentioned serious drought and lack of rainfall, around the Levant. Another noteworthy feature of almost all inscriptions dating back to this era is the use of the verse ‘despair not from the mercy of Allah’, which clearly demonstrates religious trends and beliefs across these communities.

Address for Correspondence: [alhousan@yahoo.com](mailto:alhousan@yahoo.com)

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