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New evidence of a conflict between the Nabataeans and the *Ḥwlt* in a Safaitic inscription from Wadi Ram

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Abstract

This article reads and interprets a Safaitic inscription discovered in Wadi Ram that mentions a conflict between the *Ḥwlt*, a North Arabian tribe, and the Nabataeans.

Keywords: Safaitic; Chronology; Nabataeans

1 The Text

The text under consideration, discovered in Wadi Ram in 2004, was incised with a wide instrument on an oblong slab of sandstone. The inscription consists of 56 characters, written in a boustrophedon manner.

Transliteration: *l zyd bn m'z bn grm w r'cy s'nt 'ys¹ f h lt s'lm w gnyt w h ds²r hb s¹d l- nbṭ l- ḥwlt*

'By Zyd son of M'z son of Grm and he pastured in the year of 'ys¹, so, O Lt, [grant] security and abundance, and, O Ds²r, give aid to the Nabataeans against the *Ḥwlt*.'

2 Commentary

2.1 Writing Materials

Unlike most Safaitic inscriptions, this text was incised in sandstone rather than basalt. The greatest concentration sandstone texts is found in northern Saudi Arabia (see, for example, Al-Theeb 2003). It is also possible to find inscriptions carved on limestone as well, although these are less numerous than the sandstone ones. The letter shapes of this text are unremarkable and fall within the typical range of variation for the Safaitic script.

2.2 The inscription

As in the vast majority of Safaitic inscriptions, this text begins with the *lam auctoris*, which has conventionally been translated as a sign of authorship, 'by'.¹

¹For a discussion on the various possibilities, see Al-Jallad (2015: 4-6) and Macdonald (2006: 294-295).

2.3 Genealogy

All three names attested in the genealogy are common, although no other inscriptions by this author are known.

2.4 Narrative

The narrative component consists of a single verb, *rʿy* ‘he pastured’, followed by a dating formula introduced by *s¹nt* ‘year’. Since the inhabitants of the Harrah did not have a fixed calendar (Al-Jallad 2014), authors usually dated their inscriptions by notable events. The year of *ʿys¹*, however, has not yet been encountered in other inscriptions. Interpretations of *ʿys¹* can range from a personal name, perhaps *ʿiyās*, to a noun, ‘despair’. The following prayer may suggest that the latter interpretation is correct, and that despair was connected to the absence of rain or herbage, a common complaint in the inscriptions (e.g. KRS 169; RWQ 326).

2.5 Prayer

Following the dating formula, the author appeals to the goddess *lt*, probably *Lāt*, for security and abundance, very typical requests in the inscriptions. However, the author continues, and appeals to *Ds²r*, the Nabataean national deity, to aid the Nabataeans against the Ḥwlt, an enemy social group known from a number of other Safaitic inscriptions. From a grammatical perspective, this formulation is unremarkable: *hb* is the imperative of the common verb *whb* ‘to give’, with its indirect object introduced by *l-*. The preposition *ʿl* meaning ‘against’ is also well attested (Al-Jallad 2015: 149).

3 Nbṭ – Ḥwlt engagements

While there are many inscriptions that testify to conflicts between the inhabitants of the Harrah and the Ḥwlt tribe, who appear to come from elsewhere, there is little information about the latter group. A few Safaitic inscriptions were composed by men who called themselves Ḥwl-ites, *ḥwly*, and a Hismaic inscription from North Arabia, south of Tabūk, composed by a man who gave his lineage as *d ʿl ḥwlt* ‘of the lineage of Ḥwlt’ is known (Macdonald 2009b: 160, fig. 10). The Ḥwlt are probably to be connected with the Avalitae, whom Pliny associates with the North Arabian oases of Dūmah and Ḥegrā (Macdonald 2009 III: 42).

The engagement between the Nabataeans and Ḥwlt is mentioned again in Stehle 16, which states: *w bʿ[ʿ]s¹mn ḡrt w s¹d h- nbṭ ʿl- ḥwlt* ‘O Bʿs¹mn, help the Nabataeans against the Ḥwlt’. The authors in both cases are sympathetic to the Nabataeans. Indeed, there are no inscriptions to my knowledge in which authors support the Ḥwlt. Finally, a war of the Ḥwlt – *ḥrb ḥwlt* – is mentioned in ISB 365.1, but it is unclear if this event refers to the conflict mentioned in the present inscription, and possibly Stehle 16, or if it concerns another encounter between the Ḥwlt and other inhabitants of this region.

4 Conclusion

This text sheds a small ray of light on the relationship between the Nabataeans and the nomadic tribes of North Arabia, and the attitudes of the nomads of the Ḥarrah regarding these contests. While the Nabataeans are viewed both positively and negatively in the Safaitic inscriptions, the Ḥwlt are always regarded with enmity. The prayers to aid the Nabataeans against the Ḥwlt reflect this general trend.

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Figures



Figure 1: Photograph of image (by the author)

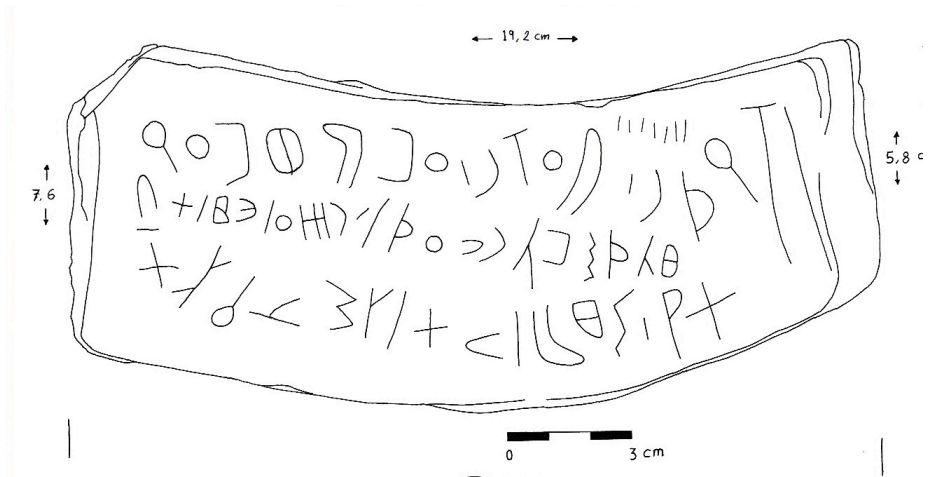


Figure 2: Tracing of image (by the author)

Sigla

ISB	Safaitic inscription in Oxtoby 1968.
KRS	Safaitic inscriptions in King unpublished.
RWQ	Al-Rousan 2005.
Stehle	Inscriptions in Stehle 1960.

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