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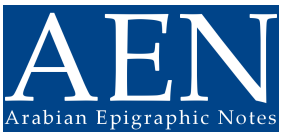

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A New Nabataean Inscription from the Moab Plateau*

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Abstract

This paper deals with a new unpublished Nabataean inscription found in al-ʿAdnāniyah town, which is located to the north of Muʾtah in the Governorate of Karak in southern Jordan. The inscription represents a new addition to the corpus of Nabataean inscriptions from the Moab Plateau. The text, which is dated to the 29th year of Aretas IV, mentions the construction of *rbʿyʾ*, a term that has not been attested previously in Nabataean.

Keywords: Nabataeans Nabataean inscriptions Nabataean religion Cultic practice

1 Introduction

The inscription dealt with here was found in al-ʿAdnāniyah town, which is located approximately 2 km to the north of Muʾtah in the Governorate of Karak in southern Jordan. The coordinates of the site, which lies about 1170 m above the sea level, are 31.122007 and 35.692656.

Al-ʿAdnāniyah, which was called Miḥna in the accounts of early travelers and explorers,[1] was visited by several explorers such as Seetzen (1810: 416), Irby & Mangles (1823: 113), Mauss & Sauvaire (1867: 484), Tristram (1873: 117), Doughty (1888: 22), Brünnow & von Domaszewski (1904–1909 I: 103), Musil (1907–1908: 19, 77, 152, 362, 365) and Glueck (1939: 99–100). The site has been referred to in these accounts as a large ruined village.

Several Nabataean graffiti and inscriptions have been found in the Moab plateau and these include short texts uncovered in Dhāt Rās (Zayadine 1970: 131–132; El-Maani 1996), al-Batra (El-Maani & Kareem 1999: 133) and in Zgaybeh to the west of al-Qaṣr (Worschech 1985: 171). The text that is dealt with in our current paper constitutes an important addition to the corpus of

*Many thanks are due to John Healey and Laïla Nehmé for reading the draft version of this paper and their valuable comments and suggestions.

[1]The ancient name was Miḥna but it has been changed recently by the local inhabitants because of its negative meaning in Arabic: “catastrophe, disaster” (Knauf 1991: 284).

known texts from the Nabataean period in Moab. Moreover, other inscriptions were found at the site and those were dated to the Byzantine and Islamic periods (Canova 1954: 281–284).

Figure 1: Map of the Karak Governorate showing the location of al-ʿAdnāniyah. Based on a map published by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, Jordan (`http://www.moma.gov.jo/maps/karak.jpg`).

Miller's archaeological survey in the Moab Plateau yielded about 967 pottery sherds from al-ʿAdnāniyah. These were dated to the period between the Late Bronze Age and the Ottoman period, including sherds dated to the Nabataean period (Miller 1991: 113). These indicate that the site was continuously and densely inhabited during these periods.

Figure 2: General view of the courtyard and the cave

Figure 3: Photograph of the inscription (taken by Younes Shdaifat)

2 The Text

The text was found in the courtyard of one of the traditional houses that were exposed by some treasure hunters (figure 2). We are thankful to Moawiyah Ad-Dhmour, a student in the Department of Archaeology and Tourism at Muʾtah University, for drawing our attention to this remarkable stone.

The stone was seemingly placed originally at the entrance of a nearby cave which might have been a tomb that was sealed by a side door built of soft, dressed limestone blocks approximately 70 cm in height and 45 cm in width. The cave was looted and partially damaged.

The text was incised on a hard and irregular limestone block that measures approximately 72 cm by 51 cm. Its thickness is about 23 cm. The surface of the stone is even and it is naturally flat.

The text consists of five lines and the length of the first line is about 46 cm and the average height of the letters is 7 cm. The letters are irregular in size and the spacing between them is not identical. They can be clearly read except in the last part, which has been defaced, and the part that bears the last word is seemingly broken.

As far as paleography is concerned, one point is worth mentioning here. The form of the letter *t*, with a loop round the left stroke, is usually found in texts from the late 2nd to the 4th century AD and it is surprising to find it here in a text dated to the reign of Aretas IV, both in medial and final position (for discussion see Nehmé 2010). This confirms that a particular letter shape cannot be used as an absolute method to date a text but may only give a general and hypothetical indication.

The text reads as follows:

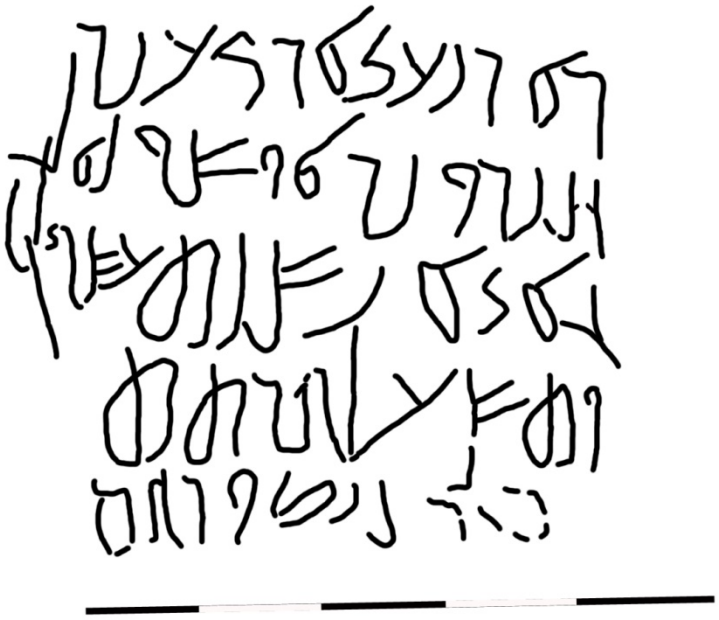

Figure 4: Tracing of the inscription (drawn by Zeyad al-Salameen)

2.1 Transliteration

dʾ rbʿyʾ dy ʿbd
ḥbrw br ʾwšw lʾlh
gʾyʾ bšnt ʿšryn
wtšʿ lḥrtt
mlk nbṭw rḥm [ʿmh]

2.2 Translation

This is the "resting-place *or* (square) plaque" which *ḥbrw* son of *ʾwšw* constructed for the god of Gaia in the year twenty-nine of (the reign of) Aretas, king of the Nabataeans, lover of his [people].

2.3 Commentary

dʾ: "this" (feminine) (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 333ff).

rbʿyʾ: "resting-place" or "(square) plaque".

This word is not found in this current form in Nabataean, but there are other forms derived from the root *rbʿ* attested in Nabataean and they are found in texts referring to religious constructions and dedications.

The root of the word is related to the Semitic root *rbʿ* that has different meanings. The word *rabaʿa* رَبَع has different meanings in Arabic and one of

them is "remained, abode, dwelt", while *marbaʿ* مَرْبَعْ means "house" (Lane 2003: 128). Another meaning of this word is "four" and it may refer to structure with four corners. Nehmé linked the word with the Semitic root *rbḍ* "lie down" and concludes that the words *ʾrbʿnʾ* and *rbʿtʾ* mean "ritual couches" dedicated to gods (2003). *ʾrbʿnʾ* and *rbʿtʾ* are attested in inscriptions found in Sidon (CIS II 160), Cos (Levi Della Vida 1938), Tell esh-Shuqafiyyeh (Fiema & Jones 1990: 240), Kharabā (Dussaud & Macler 1903: 313), Boṣrā (Littmann 1914: 71), Umm as-Surāb (Littmann 1914: 2), Petra (Nehmé 2003: fig. 9) and Ṣirwāḥ in southern Arabia (Nebes 2006: 10).

The following table summarizes the Nabataean texts that contain *rbʿtʾ* and *ʾrbʿnʾ*:

Table 1: Attestations of rbʿtʾ and ʾrbʿnʾ

Word	Place	Comments
rbʿtʾ	Kharabā	The name of the divinity to whom the text was dedicated is missing.
[r]bʿtʾ	Boṣrā	The name of the divinity to whom the text was dedicated is missing.
ʾrbʿnʾ	Umm as-Surāb	The name of the divinity to whom the text was dedicated is missing.
rbʿtʾ	Tell esh-Shuqafiyyeh	Records a dedication of a *rbʿtʾ* to Dushara of Daphne
rbʿtʾ	Sidon	Records a dedication of a *rbʿtʾ* to Al-ʿUzzā
rbʿtʾ	Petra	The name of the divinity to whom the text was dedicated is missing.
rbʿtʾ	Cos	Records a dedication of a *rbʿtʾ* to Al-ʿUzzā.
rbʿtʾ	Ṣirwāḥ	Records a dedication of a *rbʿtʾ* to Dushara

dy: a well-known relative pronoun meaning "which, that".

ʿbd: "made, constructed". This verb occurs frequently in Nabataean Aramaic, Hebrew, Palmyrene and Hatran (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 1029).

ḥbrw: This is the name of the dedicator. It is attested twice in two Nabataean inscriptions discovered in Sarmadāʾ in Saudi Arabia (Al-Theeb 2014: nos. 11, 76). It may be compared with *ḥbr* and *ḥbrm* that are found in pre-Islamic Arabian inscriptions (Harding 1971: 84).

ʾwšw: This name is common in Nabataean inscriptions and occurs in Nabataean in other forms such as *ʾwyšw* and *ʾwšʾlhy* (Negev 1991: 11). It occurs frequently in Pre-Islamic Arabian inscriptions (Harding 1971: 84).

lʾlh gʾyʾ: *gʾyʾ* = Gaia is to be identified with modern-day Wādī Mūsā. This toponym goes back to the Nabataean period and is attested in Nabataean in inscriptions uncovered in Oboda, al-Jawf, Wādī Rum and Wādī Mūsā (Negev 1963: 113–117; Savignac & Starcky 1957: 198; Savignac 1934: 574–575). It originated from the Semitic word *gyʾ*, which means "valley, a place where the waters flow together, low plain" (Gesenius 1844: 194). This name appears in different forms in Nabataean theophoric personal names such as *ʾmtʾlgʾ*, *ʿbdʾlgʾ* (Littmann 1914: n. 9, CIS II 157, 173, 1205) and *ʿbdʾlgyʾ* (CIS II 3138), meaning "the servant of (the god) of Eljī" (Al-Khraysheh 1986: 127; Negev 1991: 788, 790). The word *gy* is attested also as a tribal name in Hismaic inscriptions (King 1990: nos. 42, 647). For more details about Gaia, see Al-Salameen & Falahat (2012).

Who was the "god of Gaia"?

Al-ʿUzzā and al-Kutbā are linked with Gaia, and their names appear in an inscription from ʿAyn esh-Shallaleh in Wādī Rum (Savignac 1934: 574–575, no. 17; Strugnell 1959: 29–31). The term "the god of Gaia" is mentioned three times in Nabataean:

1. In an inscription found in el-Mʿeiṣreh to the north of the Petra city centre. This refers to the dedication of an *ʾgnʾ*, "basin", to *ʾlh* [*ʾl*]*gyʾ ʾlhʾ* "Ilāh-al-Gia, the god" (Dalman 1912: no. 35).

2. In a dedicatory inscription from al-Jawf which confirms that there was a sanctuary, *mḥrmtʾ*, dedicated to Dushara the god of Gaia, *dwšrʾ ʾlh gyʾʾ* (Savignac & Starcky 1957: 196–217).

3. In a dedicatory inscription from Oboda that refers to the members of the *mrzḥʾ* of Dushara the god of Gaia, *dwšrʾ ʾlh gʾyʾ* (Negev 1963: no. 10).

It appears that Dushara, who was the major Nabataean deity, was the god of Gaia. He was given many titles and described as "Lord of the House (temple)", "Lord of heaven and earth", "God of our Lord (the king)" and "the one who separates night from day" (Zayadine 2003: 59).

bšnt ʿšryn wtšʿ: *bšnt* "in the year of". *šnt* is a feminine singular noun "year" which appears frequently in dated Nabataean texts. The word is followed then by the year when the text was written: *ʿšryn wtšʿ* "in the year twenty-nine" of Aretas IV, which is AD 20.

lḥrtt mlk nbṭw rḥm **[*ʿmh*]** : "of (the reign of) Aretas, king of the Nabataeans, lover of his [people]". This formula is common in Nabataean.

3 Conclusion

This article discussed a new Nabataean inscription found in Moab (southern Jordan), dated to the 29th year of Aretas IV (AD 20). It mentions the construc-

tion of *rbʿyʾ*, a term that has not been attested previously in Nabataean.The text represents a new additional supplement to the previously known Nabataean inscriptions from the Moab Plateau.

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Sigla

CIS II Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum, Pars Secunda, Inscriptiones Aramaicas Continens, 1889.

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