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# New Nabataean Inscriptions from Umm al-Jimāl

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# New Nabataean Inscriptions from Umm al-Jimāl\*

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## Abstract

This article presents four new Nabataean inscriptions from Umm al-Jimāl in north-eastern Jordan. The first text, which is dedicatory, is dated to year fifty-five of the Roman Province of Arabia, AD 161. The second one mentions the dedication of a *mqr̥t* 'hollow basin', a word that is not attested previously in the Nabataean inscriptions. The remaining two texts are tombstones whose shape and contents are similar to the previously published tombstones from the Ḥawrān region.

**Keywords:** Nabataean inscriptions   Aramaic   Umm al-Jimal   Funerary Inscriptions   Province of Arabia

## Introduction

In this paper, four new Nabataean texts will be discussed and analyzed. They were found by Muaffaq Hazza in different sites in the south-western sector of Umm al-Jimāl which is located in north-eastern Jordan. Parts of them are damaged but they can be read with certainty. Despite the fact that they were written by different persons, the style of their script is relatively uniform. One of them is dated to second half of the second century AD. Based on the shape

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\*This paper is dedicated to Lāila Nehmé, in recognition of her pioneering studies on Nabataean epigraphy.

of the letters of the other texts, it seems that their date may be somewhere around the first to third centuries AD.

The earliest date of Nabataean occupation at Umm al-Jimāl is not entirely clear yet, but it is likely to have been contemporary with that of the Nabataean towns established in southern Ḥawrān. The town became prosperous during the Nabataean period as indicated by the results of the fieldwork campaigns conducted there which uncovered various Nabataean architectural remains, tombs, hydrological installations as well as inscriptions (Littmann 1914; Butler 1919; De Vries 1986; 1990). Sixty Nabataean inscriptions were published from Umm al-Jimāl and these include funerary steles, *nefesh* dedications, *msgd* 'altar' dedications, short signatures and texts of unknown nature (Nehmé 2010: 483). The four new texts presented below represent an addition to the previously published group of inscriptions from the ancient city.

## Inscription 1

This text, which consists of three lines, is inscribed on a limestone block measuring 21 cm high by 70 cm wide. It is dated to year fifty-five of the era of the Roman Province of Arabia, AD 161.

### Transliteration

.....dy? ... [z]b[nw] br? 'wtw  
[n]bty' wd' bšnt 55  
[lhpr]kyh

### Translation

.....dy? ... [z]b[nw] son of? 'wtw  
the [N]abataean and this [was] in the year 55  
[of the P]rovince

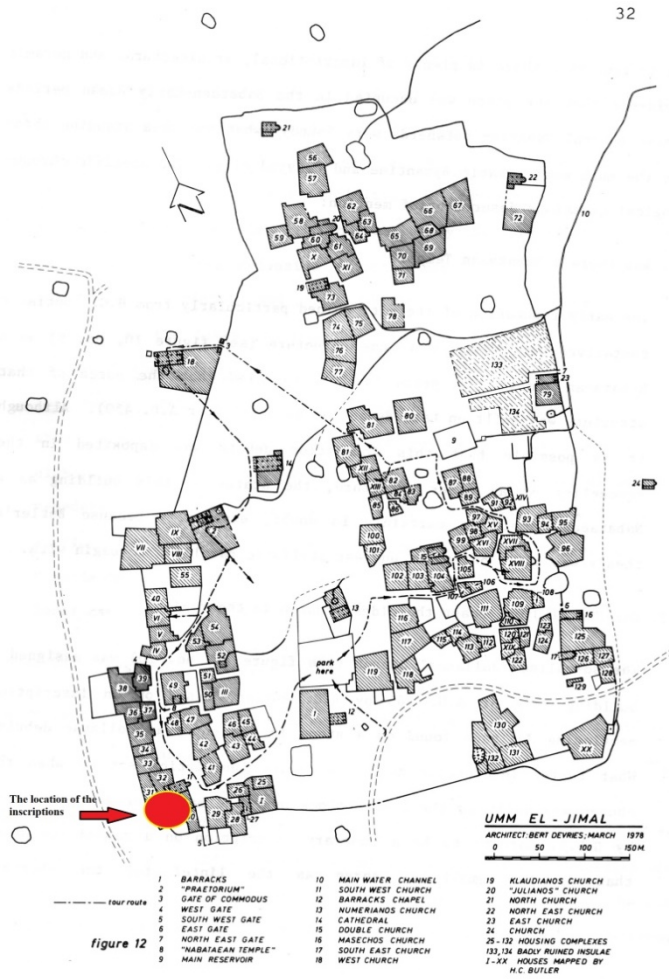
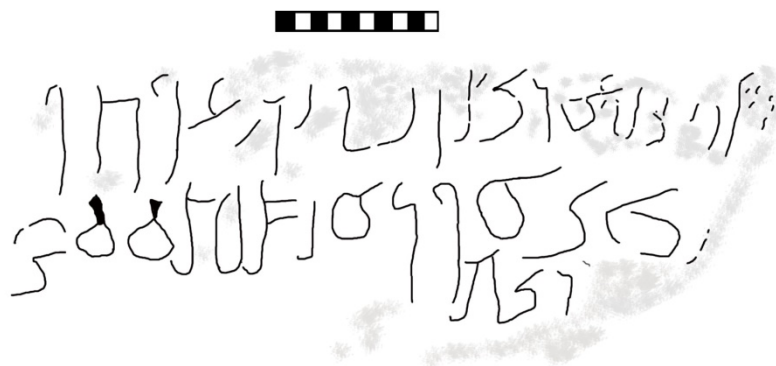


Figure 1: Map of Umm al-Jimāl, showing the location of the inscriptions (De Vries 1990).



*Figure 2: Drawing of inscription 1 (drawn by Zeyad al-Salameen).*



*Figure 3: Photo of inscription 1 (photographed by Muaffaq Hazza)*

## Commentary

The beginning of the text is damaged and the beginning of the second and third lines is missing. The only word in the first line that can be read with certainty is the personal name *ʿwtw*. The second and third lines are quite clear.

*ʿwtw*, Arabic *Ġawṭ*, is a proper name that is well known in Nabataean (Negev 1991: 50), Palmyrene (Stark 1971: 105) and in other derivations in North and South Arabian inscriptions (Harding 1971: 452).

[*n*] *bty* ‘[N]abataean’: this term is not common in Nabataean inscriptions but it is attested in a few texts dated after the Roman annexation of Nabataea in AD 106. It is attested twice previously in Nabataean. It appears in a text found at Umm Jadhāyidh in northern Arabia and dated, depending on the shapes of the letters, to the first or second century AD. It reads as follows (al-Theeb 2010: n. 549): *mškw nbty šlm mn qdm mntw ʿlht* ‘May *mškw* the Nabataean be safe in the presence of Manāt the goddess’.

In addition, there is another example of *nbty* in an inscription from the Wādī Minayḥ in the Eastern Desert in Egypt (Nehmé in Cuvigny & Bülow-Jacobsen 1999: 154–155, no. 40). It reads as follows: *dkyr kl nbty btb* ‘Remembered be every Nabataean, for good’.

The last parallel example is the word (*nbty* ‘Nabataean’), which is attested in a short funerary Nabataean text found in al-Fāw in Arabia (Al-Ansary & Taiaran 2008: 104).

The word is found also in a Palmyrene text dated to AD 132 in which the writer described himself as *nbty*. The writer of this text first gives his ethnic identity (*nbty* ‘the Nabataean’), then his social affiliation (*rwḥy* ‘the Rawḥite [or Rūḥite]’), followed by his military identity or profession (*dy hw prš [b]ḥyrt wbmšryt dy ʿn* ‘who is a cavalryman in Ḥirtā and in the camp of ʿĀnā’; Macdonald 2009: 302).

The term *nbty* was used in Nabataean texts to refer to the Nabataeans, and is particularly widespread in the dating formulas, when referring to *mlk nbty*, “the king of the Nabataeans”. It is clear that in the Roman period, *nbty* cannot refer to the Nabataeans as a political entity because the Nabataean kingdom had disappeared. It is more likely that that it referred to a geographical or cultural origin (Macdonald 1991: 116). Macdonald concludes that “when we refer to the Nabataeans we do not mean everyone who used the Nabataean



script, but a distinct and self-conscious community, members of which actually referred to themselves as Nabataeans” (Macdonald 1993: 307), and to describe oneself as a ‘Nabataean’ is “to do little more than indicate one’s country of origin” (Macdonald 1991: 107).

The term was used in South Arabian inscriptions to refer to ‘Nabataea’. A recently published Qatabanian inscription, dated to the second half of the first century BC and the first half of the first century AD, mentions several places names and these include *hgrm rqmm* ‘the city of Petra’ and *nbṭm* ‘Nabataea’ (Maraqten 2014: 105). Another Sabaeen inscription dated after the third century AD mentions the Land of Nabataeans (*ʿrd nbṭm*) (Schiettecatte & Arbach 2016: 12–14).

It is worth mentioning that the authors of some Safaitic texts refer to themselves as Nabataeans, *h-nbṭy* ‘the Nabataean’ (see for example OCIANA: CSNS 661, MISS.B 1, MISS.B 2, TaLNS 43b). The reason why these individuals defined themselves as Nabataeans is that they felt they were strangers among the communities where these texts were written (al-Otaibi 2015: 301).

*w-d* ‘and this’: *d* ‘this’, feminine demonstrative pronoun, common in Nabataean.

*b-šnt* ‘in the year of’: *šnt* is a feminine singular noun ‘year’, which appears frequently in dated Nabataean texts.

[*lhpr*]kyh ‘[of the P]rovince’: the term *hprky*’/*hprkyh* (in Nabataean), ἐπαρχία (ὕπαρχία) (in Greek) was used to refer to the territory belonging to the Roman Province of Arabia (Monferrer-Sala 2013: 106). After the annexation of Nabataean by Trajan in AD 106, the inscriptions written in Nabataean started using a new dating system based on the era of this province, which starts in AD 106.

As a matter of fact, in Nabataean and Greek texts dated to the Provincia Arabia there are three types of dating formulae representing the use of this era: those which contain a numeral date, those which refer to the province – in Nabataean *lhprky*’, *lhprk*, *lhprkyh*; in Greek ἐπαρχίας – in addition to those that refer specifically to Bostra (Fiema 1988: 110–111).

The earliest Nabataean inscription dated using the word *hprky*’/*hprkyh* were found at Oboda in the Negev and these are dated to AD 108 (year 2) and 126 (Negev 1963: 113, 118). The next earliest one is the Madaba inscription which is dated to the ‘third year of the eparch of Bostra’ (*bšnt tlt lhprk bšr*)

(Milik 1958: n. 6). The Greek and Nabataean papyri from the Cave of Letters, on the other hand, used a triple dating system (consulships, regnal years of Hadrian and the era of the province of Arabia: κατὰ τὸν ἀριθμὸν τῆς νέας ἐπαρχείας Ἀραβίας (Meimaris et al. 1992: 147).

## Inscription 2

The text is inscribed around a basalt vessel that was uncovered in the baptistery of the Southwest Church in Umm al-Jimāl, which is located in the southwest angle of the city. The ground plan of the church is basilical, its nave divided into three aisles by two arcades of three arches each (Butler 1913: 183–184).

The stone basin was seemingly brought from another site to be used in the church. The shapes of the letters of this text indicate that they may be dated to the first and third centuries AD but the church itself was constructed during the Byzantine period. The stone vessel survived through the Roman period and was probably reused in the church.

The stone basin is approximately 56 cm in height and 84 cm in diameter. The text seemingly consists of one line but most of it is missing because the basin is broken. On the other side, one can only distinguish Nabataean letters such as *ʾ*, *š* and *m*.

The letters of the text are almost regular in size. They are clear, except the last part, for which no reading is proposed here.

The text reads as follows:

### Transliteration

*dʾ mqrtʾ dy qrb....*

### Translation

This is the vessel which was dedicated [by].....

የመከላከያ ሥልጣን

Figure 4: Drawing of inscription 2 (drawn by Zeyad al-Salameen)



Figure 5: Photo of inscription 2 (photographed by Muaffaq Hazza)

## Commentary

*d*': 'this' (feminine) (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 333ff.).

*mqrt*': this word is attested for the first time in Nabataean. It is derived from the Semitic root *nqr* 'to dig, chisel, hew out' which occurs frequently in Aramaic and Arabic (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995; Jastrow 1903; Sokoloff 1992; Lane 2003). The root has similar meaning in Syriac but it means also 'to purify' (Payne Smith 1903: s.v.). The word may be compared with *mqr* and *mqwr* that were used in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic to mean 'cistern, aqueduct' (Sokoloff 1992: 326). In addition, the word *mqrt*' may be closely compared with *mqr* which is used in the colloquial Jordanian dialect to mean 'hollow basin', a meaning we highly prefer for the Nabataean word.

*dy*: a well-known relative pronoun meaning 'which, that'. The letter *d* is inscribed twice. This is most likely because the engraver of the inscription first wrote the letter badly and then incised it correctly.

*qrb* 'offered, dedicated': this is the standard verb used in Nabataean to dedicate objects to gods and goddesses. It occurs frequently in Nabataean Aramaic, Hebrew, Palmyrene and Hatran (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 1029).

## Discussion

The text is significant because it talks about a new Nabataean cultic dedication, *mqrt*' 'hollow basin'. It is most likely that this basin was used in rituals where water was used.

Epigraphic reference to the dedication of basins is not common in Nabataea. There is only one example in the previously published Nabataean texts. The word *'gn*' 'basin, crater' is attested once in a Nabataean text from el-M'ayṣreh in Petra (Dalman 1912: no. 35; Milik 1972: 109).

In the light of the available archaeological evidence, it is clear that water had a ritual significance during the Nabataean period. The numerous basins found in a religious context at Petra, for example, reveal the importance of water and purification to ritual practices (Alpass 2011: 56).

The association of water sources with many Nabataean shrines and temples is notable. There are several categories of associations between water and religious features.

**Category 1:** places where water was necessary for the rituals and where basins or cisterns were thus built in the temples/shrines, etc. Nearly every shrine or temple has a nearby pool or a source of water of some size (Erickson-Gini 2015: 317). Water was most likely used in the temple as an offering to the deity (Eddinger 2004: 23–24). Dedications in Nabataea were normally offered inside temples, as evidenced by the cult statues and figurines and dedications often found within them. In the Temple of the Winged Lions, for example, niches between the engaged columns of the cella may have been used for votive offerings (Healey 2001: 74). Other dedications and offerings included altars, idols, cult statues and pottery vessels.

Lion heads furnished with water spouts were found in the Khirbet et-Tannur temple (McKenzie et al. 2013: 114). In addition, parts of a water basin were found there associated with Hadad (McKenzie et al. 2013: 24).

**Category 2:** sanctuaries which were clearly built in a particular place because of the presence of a water source nearby (usually natural). Association between cult and water springs was evident in Nabataea in the light of the available archaeological and epigraphic materials. A sanctuary was, for example, built close to the ‘Ayn esh-Shellaleh spring in Wādī Rum. Close to this spring are numerous religious inscriptions (mentioning the goddess Allāt) and betyls which indicate a close association between religions and springs of water (Healey 2013: 90). Similar examples are found in Qaṭṭār ad-Dayr in Petra. In addition, a Nabataean text was found close to the La‘abān spring and this represents a dedication by Natirel for the chief of this spring (Savignac & Starcky 1957: 215–217). The reference to this official in charge gives us a glimpse of what was a widespread and regular system of control of springs (Healey 2013: 90).

A considerable number of niches and betyls in Petra are located close to water sources and it seems that the Nabataeans “perceived water as sacred and that many examples of ornamental water display at Petra held religious significance” (Bedal 2000: 167).

**Category 3:** Hydraulic monuments (dams for instance) which are placed under the protection of the deity.<sup>1</sup> The available archaeological evidence

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<sup>1</sup>Some Nabataean dams in Petra and its environs bear inscriptions. On the left side of a Nabataean dam in el-Ḥarezah near Wādī Rum there is an inscription that mentions renewing a dam in the year forty-one of the rule of Aretas IV (Milik 1958).

indicates that there was direct association between water and some Nabataean gods. It seems clear that there was a desire to place the water supply under the protection of the gods (Alpass 2011: 114), and that sanctuaries dedicated to Dushara were provided with water. This is evident in the story of the wife of Al-Ṭufayl ibn ‘Amr al-Dawsī (died 633). The latter asked her upon her conversion to Islam to go to the *ḥimʿ* [*ḥimā*] = temenos of Dushara and cleanse herself from its water and she went and washed (Ibn Hishām 1985: 1/384).

Epigraphic evidence has confirmed that some Nabataean deities were associated with water and hydrological cultic dedications were known among the Nabataeans. The Turkmāniyyah tomb inscription in Petra refers to dedications to Dushara, “the god of our lord, and his sacred throne and all the gods”, and these include wells of water, *bʿrwt myʿ* (Healey 2009: 63–65). Another Nabataean inscription found in Oboda in the Negev and dated to the reign of Rabbel II (AD 70–106), refers to the construction of a dam, *skrʿ* (Negev 1963: no. 10 p. 113–117). The meaning of the word is not immediately clear but it may refer to the water system and this construction was dedicated to “Dushara, the god of Gaia”. Therefore, we have an association of builders responsible for maintaining the water supply, and that they met in honour of Dushara.

Another short Nabataean text from Oboda mentions the dedication of a dam: *dnh skrʿ dy qrb* ‘this dam which he dedicated’ (Negev 1961: no. 7a), but it is not known to whom this dam was dedicated.

### Inscription 3

This text, which consists of three lines, is inscribed on a rectangular block.

#### Transliteration

*mškw br ʿqrb*

#### Translation

*Mškw* son of *ʿqrb*



*Figure 6: Drawing of inscription 3 (drawn by Zeyad al-Salameen)*



*Figure 7: Photo of inscription 3 (photographed by Muaffaq Hazza)*

## Commentary

*Mškw* is one of the most common names in the Nabataean inscriptions of the Ḥawrān (Littmann 1914: nos. 38, 47, 61, 62, 63, 64). It appears in the Ancient North Arabian and Greek texts (Harding 1971: 545; Wuthnow 1930: 74, 150). *ʿqrb* appears frequently in Nabataean inscriptions found at Umm al-Jimāl (Graf & Said 2006: 272). The name is well known in Safaitic and Greek inscriptions found there (Harding 1971: 427; Wuthnow 1930: 160). It appears also in Ancient North Arabian inscriptions (King 1990: 585).

## Inscription 4

The text is inscribed on a block measuring 132 cm high by 32 cm wide. It consists of two lines.

## Transliteration

*ʿzl brt bnw or blw*

## Translation

*ʿzl daughter of bnw [or blw]*

## Commentary

This is a funerary stele of a woman, which fits with Littmann's conclusion that steles with a rounded top belonged to women and those with a rectangular top belonged to men (Littmann 1914: 11). This is true for the majority of the funerary steles uncovered in the Ḥawrān region (Graf & Said 2006: 269).

*ʿzl*, Arabic *Ġazāl*, is a proper name that is well-known in Arabic. It is attested in North Arabian inscriptions (Harding 1971: 454). The name *ʿzl* is attested previously as a feminine name in Nabataean (Negev 1991: 50).

The second name may be read as *bnw* or *blw*. Both names are attested previously in Nabataean (Negev 1991: 16).





*Figure 8: Drawing of inscription 4 (drawn by Zeyad al-Salameen)*



*Figure 9: Photo of inscription 4 (photographed by Muaffaq Hazza)*

## Conclusion

This paper presents four new dedicatory and funerary Nabataean inscriptions found in Umm al-Jimāl. It includes a linguistic analysis of the vocabulary contained in the texts, as well as of the personal names. The historical significance of these texts has been also highlighted.

The inscriptions may be considered an important addition to the previously published epigraphic gazetteer from Umm al-Jimāl whose most important Nabataean remains are hidden among the Roman and Byzantine remains in the town.

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## Sigla

- OCIANA     *The Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia*. Edited by Michael C. A. Macdonald, Ali Al-Manaser and María del Carmen Hidalgo-Chacón Diez. Supported by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council and The Khalili Research Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford, 2017.

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