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The Safaitic scripts: palaeography of an ancient nomadic writing culture

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Chapter 3

Special Features

Several Safaitic texts attest graphs with square forms, forms turned by 90° to their basic shapes stances, or elongated forms. From the study of variation in the graph forms of the Safaitic texts of the JQC (§2.1), it appears that such features can be considered as *recurring graphic variables*. The way in which they are employed varies from text to text and they often appear inconsistently in different texts by the same author. Since they are sometimes used to emphasise the name of the author, while the rest of the inscription is carved without using these features,[234] it seems that, as argued by Macdonald in several places for square and 90° forms,[235] they should be interpreted as idiosyncratic stylistic elements. What would justify the classification of these features as separate scripts – as maintained by Clark (1979) with his 'square' and '90°' script categories (see §1.3.2.3) – would be the consistent employment of similar graph forms sharing such features throughout whole texts *and* in large groups of texts.

In the following, I first analyse in more detail the uses of each of these features through examples from the JQC. Subsequently, I comment on the features of texts labelled by a number of scholars as in the so-called 'square script', and argue, following Macdonald (2015), against the validity of such a script category.

3.1 Special features in the JQC

3.1.1 Square forms

In the description of the Safaitic inventories in Chapter 2, we have seen that the basic shapes of several graphemes can instantiate both curvilinear and square graphs, see for example *b*, *g*, *k*, *ḥ*, *m*, *r*, *s*^{1}, and *ẓ*. In most JQC texts in which square graphs appear, these are not employed consistently through the whole text or specific parts of it, but rather only one or few isolated graphs are square. Most examples of square graphs of the JQC are in the 'common' script, but other corpora attest clear instances of square

[234] On the practice of distinguishing the name of the author through other methods, see §5.2.

[235] Macdonald 1992a:418; Macdonald 2006:292, and the examples cited in n.86 and n.87; Macdonald 2015:12, Appendix 2.

(a) Panel with texts containing square and non-square allographs (QUR 669.34/C)

(b) Square text (QUR 148.139.1/C) running next to the camel drawing

Figure 3.1: Two 'common' texts with square graphs

graphs in the context of 'fine' and SoS texts as well.[236] It seems that the texts which have been mostly taken as examples of the so-called 'square script' were either in the SoS script or in the 'fine' script (see §3.2 below).

A typical example of the use of square forms in the JQC is shown in panel QUR 669.34/C (see Fig.3.1(a)), with a cluster of inscriptions associated to the image of a she-camel. Both square and non-square forms seem to be mixed in different ways: in both the first and the second text (starting from left),[237] the *k* takes square forms, but only in the second text the *m* is square. The s^1 of the second text, however, takes a curvilinear form,[238] while the s^1 of the third text[239] is square.

There are also examples of prolific authors using square graphs in some texts and their curvilinear equivalents in others.[240]

More rarely, however, square forms are used in most graphs of an inscription. In QUR 148.139.1/C *l bdḥ bn rgl* 'By Bdḥ son of Rgl' (Fig. 3.1(b)) – a skilfully chiselled text running vertically downwards and then turning by 90° – all relevant graphs of the name and patronym of the author are square.[241]

[236] In those scripts, one sometimes finds also the feature of giving square forms to the forks of *ʾ*, *h*, and *ṣ*, a feature only rarely found in the 'common' script.

[237] The first text (QUR 669.34.3/C) reads: *l ʾkmd bn ʾbgr* 'By ʾkmd son of ʾbgr', while the second text (QUR 669.34.2/C) reads: *l* $ws^{1\circlearrowleft}l$ *bn zb bn ʾlmlk h-bkrt* 'By $Ws^{1\circlearrowleft}l$ son of Zb son of ʾlmlk is the young she-camel'.

[238] Other inscriptions by the author of the second text, $ws^{1\circlearrowleft}l$ *bn zb*, have been attested in the corpus in which he consistently used square forms (cf. QUR 175.2.1/C, 243.1.2/C, 249.3.1/C, 636.3.1/C, 669.13.1/C), keeping overall the same writing style. Only in this inscription, however, he put a dot inside the *ʿ*, see §2.1.2.

[239] This text (QUR 669.34.1/C) reads: *l* ns^1ry *bn wd* 'By Ns^1ry son of Wd'.

[240] See, e.g, the texts by *mrr bn ʾʾb* (see §6.1.1).

[241] For a discussion of the writing style of this author, who typically employed square graphs, see §6.1.6.

3.1.2 Forms turned by 90°

Most JQC examples of this feature are in the 'common' script, where it occurs especially in graphs of *b*, *ḥ*, *k*, *m*, and *s*[1], which sometimes also present square forms (see Table 2.2).[242] Compared to the 'common' script, in the 'fine' script the basic shapes of *s*[1] and *ḥ* are consistently turned by 90°, which helps to increase their compression.[243] As to the SoS script, in the JQC we have only one example (QUR 551.93.1/SoS) of a 90° *m*, while the other *m* in the same text has a regular stance.[244]

A good example of the use of this feature is QUR 186.162.1/C (Fig. 3.2(a)) *l mrr bn ʾʾb w wlh ʿl-ḥbb-h* 'By Mrr son of ʾʾb and he was distraught on account of his beloved', where the *b*'s of *bn* 'son of' and of the patronym of the author (traced in red) are turned by 90°, while in the following part the *b*'s of *ḥbb* 'beloved' (traced in green) are carved in the regular stance. Additionally, the 90° *b*'s are also square, while the *ʾ*'s of the patronym are elongated. Different special features can thus be used in combination within the same text as well as within the same graphs. It should also be noted that, unlike for example QUR 64.73.1/C (see below), the *m* of the name was not turned by 90°. This same author and his family members carved several texts in the area, and they all seem to use special features.[245]

An interesting counterpart to this example is the structurally identical text QUR 439.37.1/C (Fig.3.2(b)), reading: *l mlk bn gml w wlh ʿl-ḥbb-h* 'By Mlk son of Gml and he was distraught on account of his beloved'. The name and patronym are distinguished through technique (hammering) and size, the statement being incised and only partly hammered, and carved in smaller graphs. In this case, unlike QUR 186.162.1/C, 90° graphs were employed to distinguish the word *ḥbb* 'beloved', rather than the name and patronym of the author, which is distinguished otherwise through technique and size. This shows that this feature could be used to distinguish any part of the text, and not only the name and genealogy of the author.

In the finely chiselled inscription QUR 64.73.1/C *l grmt bn nʾlt* 'By Grmt son of Nʾlt' (Fig. 3.2(c)), the *m* and the *b* are both turned by 90°. Texts with this name and patronym, which are possibly by the same author, occur seven times in the region, both with graphs turned by 90° and with graphs with regular stances.[246]

In QUR 372.19.4/C? *l ḥtmt bn ngy* 'By Ḥtmt son of Ngy' (Fig. 3.2(d)), the author wrote his name with the *ḥ* and the *m* turned by 90° and he also added serifs to their legs, while the patronym is carved in normal graphs.

90° graphs can also be used consistently through the entire text. For example, in

[242] The combination of these features is also a distinctive mark of the Thamudic B inventory (see §6.2.2.2).

[243] See §4.1.1.1.

[244] See §2.1.15; one of the reasons this feature is not well attested in the SoS script may be the small size of the corpus. Beyond the JQC, I am aware of one example (SIAM 42/SoS) in which only the *s*[1] and the *f* are turned by 90°, but curiously not the *b* and the *m*, as it is most often the case in the 'common' script.

[245] See §6.1.1 and §6.1.9.1.

[246] QUR 64.73.1/C and 360.37.1/C present 90° graphs, while QUR 2.493.3/C (see Fig. 7.3(a)), 148.16.1/C, 186.33.4/C, 449.78.1/C, and 965.53.1/C have no 90° graphs. In QUR 360.37.1/C, unlike QUR 64.73.1/C, the *m* of *grmt* is turned, while the *b* is not. Texts with this combination of name and patronym are not found outside the Jebel Qurma region (cf. OCIANA, accessed on 2 June 2021).

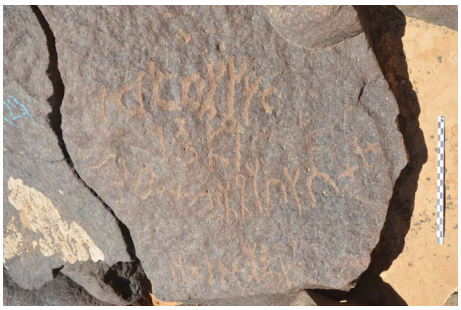
(a) QUR 186.162.1/C

(b) QUR 439.37.1/C

(c) QUR 64.73.1/C

(d) QUR 372.19.4/C? (upper text)

(e) QUR 186.41.4/C (incised text)



(f) QUR 148.129.1/C (2nd text from the bottom)

Figure 3.2: Inscriptions with graphs turned by 90°

(a) QUR 186.127.1/C

(b) QUR 12.34.1/C

Figure 3.3: Two 'common' texts with elongated forms

the incised inscription QUR 186.41.4/C (Fig. 3.2(e)) *l s*^{1}*krn bn[[]] ʿḏy h-bk{r}{t}* 'By S^{1}krn son of ʿḏy is the {young she-camel}', all graphs which could be rotated, including the *b* and the *k* of the caption 'young she-camel', have been turned by 90°. This is also the case in QUR 148.129.1/C (Fig. 3.2(f)) *l s*^{2}*gʿt bn ʾṣhb h-s*^{1}*trt* 'By S^{2}gʿt son of ʾṣhb is this shelter'. This inscription has been fully carved using 90° graphs, but the inscription probably written by his brother within the same cartouche[247] has not.

It can be concluded that 90° forms represented an ornamental alternative contemporary to regular 'common' forms and that there was a certain degree of idiosyncratic variation in the way they were employed.

3.1.3 Elongated forms

Elongated basic shapes represent a distinctive feature of the 'fine' script (§4.1.1.1), but elongated forms are also found in a small group of texts in the 'common' script, where this feature mostly affects the proportional length of the shafts and of the straight vertical lines of *ʾ*, *d*, *h*, *r*,[248] *ṣ*, *ṯ*, *z*, and *y*. Such components appear as very long, while smaller elements such as forks and loops are tiny. The loops and circles are often filled in.

It should be noted that the graph forms of the few elongated 'common' texts are clearly distinct from the graph forms of 'fine' texts. Moreover, in 'common' texts usually only some graphs are affected by this feature, while the distinctive elongated forms of the 'fine' script are characteristic of their inventory.

'Common' texts with elongated forms are more elaborate than the average 'common' texts and they are mostly chiselled. There are some cases in which the forks and spaces within the graphs were decorated by partially filling them in. For instance, in QUR

[247] I.e. QUR 148.129.2/C *l s*^{1}*rk bn ʾṣhb* 'By S^{1}rk son of ʾṣhb', the first text from the top.

[248] The 'common' forms of the *r* as an open curve or as a vertical line with two short arms are already quite elongated, but in the context of elongated texts such features are sometimes exaggerated, cf., e.g., the ultra-short arms of the *r* in QUR 186.127.1/C (Fig. 3.3(a)).

12.34.1/C (Fig.3.3(b)) *l ḫll bn gmḥy* 'By Ḫll son of Gmḥy', the *ḫ* is made of two elongated oblique lines and the space near the point where the two lines meet is filled in. The inscription runs above the finely chiselled drawing of a camel and then down next to his neck. The name of the author, *ḫll*, beside being distinguished through the use of this special form of the *ḫ*, is also larger and more deeply and carefully chiselled than the patronym.

In QUR 186.127.1/C (Fig. 3.3(a)), one notices the same feature of partially filling in spaces applied to the fork of the *ṣ* in the name of the author (*ṣmry*), which is carved in an elongated form. Also the *r* and the *y* appear as elongated. However, unlike in the 'fine' script, the *m* is not elongated. Moreover, in this example the name is carved in bigger graphs in comparison with the rest of the genealogy: it is distinguished both in size and through the use of elongated graphs.

In §3.1.2 above, we have seen that 90° forms are sometimes combined with square ones. Also in the case of elongation, we sometimes find it used in combination with other special features within the same graph. For example, in QUR 186.37.1/C *l ʿbdy bn mrr* 'By ʿbdy son of Mrr', the *b* of the author's name is square and elongated, while the *b* of *bn* 'son of' takes the regular curvilinear form. Another example is in QUR 186.18.1/C (see Fig. 6.9(a)) by *ʿẓhm bn mrr bn ʾʾb* – possibly *ʿbdy*'s brother[249] – who carved the papponym *ʾʾb* with an elongated 90° square form of *b*. Because of all such features, this graph accidentally looks remarkably similar to some 'common' forms of *ẓ* ⊓.

3.2 The so-called 'square script'

As seen in §1.3.2, several scholars have maintained that Safaitic texts with square graphs represent the most archaic form of the Safaitic script. Among these scholars is Clark (1979), according to whose classification of the Safaitic scripts 'square' would constitute a separate script.[250] Macdonald, on the other hand, questioned the presumed archaic nature of square texts as well as the validity of a 'square script' category. He pointed out that square forms often intermingle with curvilinear forms within the same text and that they also appear to have been used inconsistently in different inscriptions by the same author.[251]

Several texts which have been considered as typically 'square' in previous scholarship are SoS script texts by individuals who expressed their affiliation to the *ʿmrt* social group.[252] In such texts, we see that square forms are employed inconsistently from one

[249]The use of special features appears to have been characteristic of the writing style of this author's family (see §6.1.9.1, §6.1.1).

[250]Clark 1979:67–68.

[251]Macdonald 2006:292; Macdonald 2015:12, Appendix 2.

[252]The striking correlation between the use of the so-called 'square script' and the *ʾl ʿmrt* was first pointed out by G.L. Harding (*apud* Macdonald 1980:185), but cf. Macdonald 2006:292, n. 81, who remarked that not all texts by authors affiliating to this social group are square. Indeed, while the *ʾl ʿmrt* typically employed a square form of the SoS script, non-square SoS texts by *ʿmrt* authors have also been attested, e.g. CSNS 628/SoS. Another social group associated with the use of square SoS forms, the *ʾl mḥrb*, is only

(a) Ms 64/SoS

(b) AAEK 133/SoS

(c) HANA.Saf 1/SoS

(d) FMC 158706.1/SoS

Figure 3.4: Examples of square texts in the SoS script by the ʾl ʿmrt (Photos: OCIANA)

text to the other, and sometimes also within the same text. For example, if we compare Ms 64/SoS (Fig.3.4(a)) and AAEK 133/SoS (Fig. 3.4(b)), the *b*'s and the s^1's in the first text are curved, but in the latter they are square. In Ms 64/SoS itself, which has two instances of the *g*, the first one is curved, while the second one is square.

We can classify the script of texts by the *ʿmrt* as SoS because of the occurrence of the primary distinguishing feature of this script, i.e. the *ḏ* as two concentric circles ⊙ – see Ms 64/SoS (Fig. 3.4(a)), HANA.Saf 1/SoS (Fig. 3.4(c)), HCH 194.1/SoS, HASI 23/SoS, KhNSJ 2.1/SoS – as well as the following secondary distinguishing features:[253]

- The s^2 as a wavy line with two curves 𐤎, e.g. HANA.Saf 1/SoS (Fig. 3.4(c)), FMC 158706.1/SoS (Fig. 3.4(d)), HCH 191.2/SoS, ASFF 406/SoS, etc.;
- The $\underline{d}$ with a hooked tail 𐤕, e.g. AAEK 133/SoS (Fig. 3.4(b)), HANA.Saf 1/SoS (Fig. 3.4(c)), FMC 158706.1/SoS (Fig. 3.4(d)), etc.;
- The form of *k* with a long vertical tail and small body 𐤊, e.g. HANA.Saf 1/SoS (Fig. 3.4(c)), ASFF 406/SoS, etc.;

attested in two texts by the same author (ISB 57/SoS and AbKRI 1/SoS).

[253]For a definition of primary *vs* secondary distinguishing features, see §1.3.3.2; for a complete list of the SoS script distinguishing features, see §2.2.1.3.

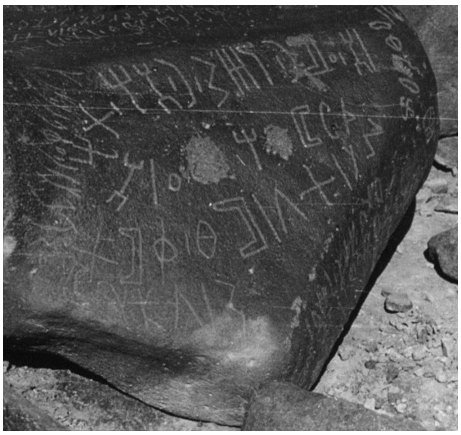
- The square form of *r* with two curly elements protruding towards the inside , see, e.g., all examples of *r* in Fig. 3.4 and note also Al-Mafraq Museum 93/SoS, which contains the SoS variant with only one arm curling back .

Some texts present a *t* with a swastika form (e.g. FMC 158706.1/SoS (Fig. 3.4(d)), ASFF 406/SoS, etc.), which, as noted by King (1990a), is a feature which is occasionally found in SoS texts[254]—although it is not found in the ones from Jebel Qurma. This form also occurs in a few 'fine' texts; it is one of the typical stylistic traits of the texts by the *ʾl dʾf*, possibly a sub-group of the *ʾl ʿwḏ*.[255]

A further group within the so-called 'square script' presents 'fine' features. One example is SIJ 39/F, by a member of the lineage of *ʿwḏ*, shown in Fig. 3.5(a). Winnett (1957) assumed this and other texts from his collection to be archaic merely because of the use of square forms. However, as in the SoS script examples above, square forms are employed inconsistently: the *ʾ*, the *ḏ*, and the *m* take square forms, while the *b* exhibits the typical 'fine' form, i.e. a shallow curve, as do the *r* – a shallow curve with two vertical hooks – and the *s*[1], which has the typical 'fine' pointed form with a vertical stance. Macdonald also pointed at examples of 'fine' texts in which square forms are used to emphasise the name, genealogy, and lineage of the author, the rest of the text being written in normal forms.[256] One such example is WH 1673/F (Fig. 3.5(b)), by a member of the lineage of *ḍf*, where the *m* in the first part of the text is square, while the *m* later in the text is curvilinear. The *b*'s, however, are regular shallow curves throughout the whole text. One can also notice that while the *ḥ* is among the graphs taking a square form, it still features the vertical stance characterising the 'fine' shape . Another example Macdonald brings is LP 325/F (Fig. 3.5(c)), by a member of the *ʿwḏ*, in which the genealogy, lineage and first part of the text is square, while the rest is in the normal 'fine' script. One can clearly contrast the square form of the *r* in the first part of the text to the most common curved 'fine' equivalent later in the text . RMSK 1/F (Fig. 3.5(d)), by a member of the lineage of *ḍf*, of the *kn* sub-group, is fully carved using square graphs, see, e.g., the forms of *b*, *r*, *m*, *ʾ*, *h*, and *ḏ*. Nevertheless, one can point at the distinctive 'fine' form of the *k*, i.e. a shallow curve with a slanting stroke on top, and at the vertical stances of both *s*[1] and *ḥ*. In LP 325/F, WH 1673/F and RMSK 1/F, the square forms of the *r* still keep the vertical hooks which are typical of the 'fine' shape of the *r* . This feature can be contrasted to the typical square SoS form of *r*, which is similar but slightly different, since there the arms end with hooks curving backwards .

Finally, it should be noted that, as shown in the examples discussed in §3.1.1 above, the use of square forms is not only a trait of SoS and 'fine' texts, since it appears in 'common' texts as well. The attestation of square forms in texts in all three Safaitic scripts further confirms Macdonald's idea that, rather than representing a separate Safaitic script, square graphs were employed as a stylistic device.

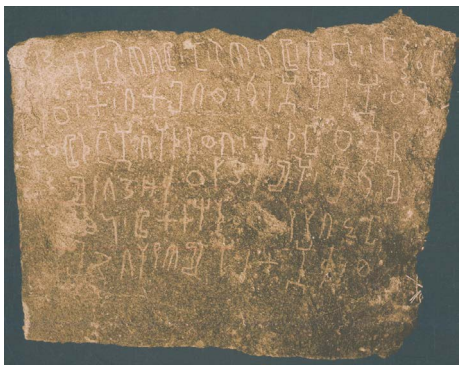
[254] See King 1990a:§2.I, n. 97; cf., e.g., the occurrence of this form in NSR 20/SoS and HASI 62/SoS.
[255] See, e.g., BRenv.A 1/F, BRenv.A 2/F, and KRS 1024/F (see §B.2).
[256] See Macdonald 2015:32.



(a) SIJ 39/F

(b) WH 1673/F

(c) LP 325/F



(d) RMSK 1/F

Figure 3.5: Examples of square texts in the ‘fine’ script (Photos: OCIANA)