The Safaitic scripts: palaeography of an ancient nomadic writing culture
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Chapter 7

Effacement and Modification of Texts

More than one fifth of the inscriptions of the JQC were intentionally damaged one way or another.[514] The most common is effacement, a disruptive practice which consists of hammering or incising marks over carvings and which is also documented in the texts: curses against whosoever would efface (ʿwr) the inscription/carvings are well attested in Safaitic and also occur in the inscriptions of the JQC.[515]

The most frequent curse is the homographic formula *h* DN ʿwr *m* [i.e. 'whosoever would'] ʿwr, usually translated as 'O DN, blind whosoever would efface'. The verb ʿwr, likely in the D-stem, is thus invoked as retribution against the person who would ʿwr the text. The G-stem of the root in Classical Arabic means 'to become blind of one eye'.[516] Al-Jallad and Jaworska argued that the Safaitic verb 'would seem to denote general blindness, as the same verb is used for the effacing of an inscription, creating the juxtaposition 'if the inscription cannot be read (because it was effaced) then let the one who has effaced it lose the ability to read (i.e. implying blindness in both eyes)".[517] While this interpretation is certainly plausible, one should note that effaced inscriptions are often still perfectly legible (see below). Thus, ʿwr may have also had a more generic meaning of 'blind (either one or both eyes)'. Al-Manaser, Al-Jouharah, et al. (2019), on the other hand, proposed the translation 'to harm' on the basis of the uses of this verb in some modern Arabic dialects.[518] Whatever the actual meaning of this verb in Safaitic, the curse seems to wish for the potential effacer a punishment which is comparable to the damage inflicted upon the text.

Another type of damage is the modification of texts through the addition of bars or other graphic elements which alter the graphematic value of graphs or make them illegible. It is probable that for the authors of Safaitic inscriptions this form of vandalisation

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[514]On the practice of effacing images, see Brusgaard 2019:119–121.

[515]See the examples in §1.2.2.10.

[516]Cf. ʿawira 'He was, or became, blind of one eye' (Lane 1863–1893:2193b).

[517]Al-Jallad and Jaworska 2019:56.

[518]Al-Manaser, Al-Jouharah, et al. 2019:260–261; see also Al-Manaser and Al-Turki 2020:114.

Figure 7.1: Example of effaced and modified text (QUR 2.363.3/C)

was considered as part of the category of effacement (ʿwr). However, since modifications represent a distinctive way of tampering with the text, they are here described separately. These two types of damage can also occur together in the same inscription. An example of this is QUR 2.363.3/C = WH 3928 (Fig. 7.1) *{l} {{ʾ}}{ʾ}{ʾ}{{b}} {b}{n} {n}{g}{y}* '{By} {ʾʾb} {son of} {Ngy}'. In addition to traces of destructive hammering occurring throughout the whole text, two bars close the forks of the first ʾ, making it look like a *ṭ*, while a horizontal line has been added to the middle of the first *b*, turning it into a *ḥ*.[519]

Lastly, a much rarer type of intentional damage is the superimposition of one or multiple carvings with another carving.

7.1 Effacement

There is a lot of variation in the types and extent of effacement. Inscriptions were partly or fully effaced by either direct hammering over the graphs in various ways or by incising several lines over them, or, in some cases, a combination of both techniques.

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[519]WH read this text as *l ṣʾb bn nn ....*, while in OCIANA it is read as *l {{ṣ}}{ʾ}{r} b{n} {n}{g}{y}* (http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0014901.html, accessed on 30 April 2020). However, the first graph of the name of the author was probably originally a ʾ rather than an ṣ: the two forks of the graph were closed by similar straight bars which have probably been added at the same time later. OCIANA proposes to read the first *b* as an *r* since it looks different from the following *b*. However, the following *b* has been partly effaced and it is thus difficult to be sure about its actual form. Moreover, the curve of the *b* which would supposedly represent an *r* is rather deep and hence more proximate to a *b*. A further argument in support of such a reading is that, unlike the proposals by WH and OCIANA, it yields an already attested sequence of name and patronym. The sequence 'ʾʾb bn ngy' occurs five other times in the context of genealogies: QUR 64.117.2/C (*mrr bn ʾʾb bn ngy*), QUR 186.18.1/C ('{z}hm {b}n mrr bn ʾʾb bn ngy bn ʾtḥ{f}*), CEDS 312/C (*bnʾhrb bn ʿbdy bn mrr bn ʾʾb bn ngy*), KRS 2412/C (*mrr bn ʾʾb bn ngy bn ʾtfḥ bn ṣyd bn ʾs¹d bn ʿḏr*), WH 2873/C (*mrr bn ʾʾb bn ngy*).

Fig.7.2(a) shows a panel in which most texts have been effaced and made illegible, although one can still recognize many of the graphs. Fig. 7.2(b) by contrast is an example of a text which has been fully scratched over, but which is still perfectly legible, it reads: QUR 148.21.3/C *l {z}{k}{r} {b}{n} {ʿ}{m}{r}* 'By {Zkr} {son of} {ʿmr}'. It is associated to the image of a camel, which has not been effaced. Effacement of figures appears to have been much rarer than the effacement of texts, and, where both text and image are present, it is often the case that only the text is effaced.[520] In QUR 2.428.1/C (Fig. 7.2(c)) *{l} ---- [b][n] {ḏ}{k}{r} h-gml* '{By}... [son of] {Ḏkr} is the camel', both genealogy of the author and head of the camel have been heavily effaced, while the caption of the text and the rest of the camel body present only hammering marks, but are otherwise intact. Brusgaard noted that it is rare to find an entirely effaced animal figure; in most cases, only specific body parts are targeted, with the head being the most frequent one.[521] In QUR 64.81.1/C *l s¹ḫr bn ʾbd {w} {t}{ẓ}r nb{ṭ}* 'By S¹ḫr son of ʾbd {and he lay in wait} for the {Nabataeans}', we find a less common situation, i.e. the name and patronym were not effaced, while the narrative part of the inscription has been scratched out, even though it is still legible.

It is important to stress that in many cases effaced inscriptions are still legible. This is in a way also paralleled by the way rock art is effaced, since usually only some parts of the drawings are damaged, as seen above. Thus, the purpose of effacement was not always necessarily to fully erase carvings, but rather to ruin them in different ways. Erasures of texts by hammering over the whole written area as to obscure them completely – as it happened to the text in Fig. 7.2(d), where one can barely recognize part of a *m* – are relatively rare.

For this reason, I would also tend to consider cases in which a line crosses the inscription only slightly altering its legibility as a type of vandalisation rather than ligaturing (see §7.2 below).

7.1.1 Corrective effacement

In some cases, one can evince that effacement was probably done by the authors themselves in order to correct or erase their own inscriptions partly or fully. For example, in QUR 171.112.1/C (Fig. 7.2(e)), the text curves upwards abruptly after the ʿ of the patronym, running above an effaced area which is likely to represent a mistake which was erased by the author himself, while in QUR 913.2.1/C *l tmn bn [[b]][[n]] fhrn* 'By Tmn son of Fhrn' (Fig. 7.2(f)), which exhibits dittography of *bn* 'son of', the second *bn* has been lightly scratched out, probably by the author himself, who realized his mistake after carving the text. Another example is QUR 2.434.1/C (see Fig.5.1(a) in Chapter 5), where before the beginning of the inscription there seems to be an attempt by the author at carving the *lām auctoris* and the first two graphs of his name ({*n*} and {*ẓ*}). These graphs have been erased, and the inscription starts again on the same line next to it. Then a partial cartouche has been drawn at the beginning of the newly carved

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[520]See Brusgaard 2019:120–121.
[521]Brusgaard 2019:119.
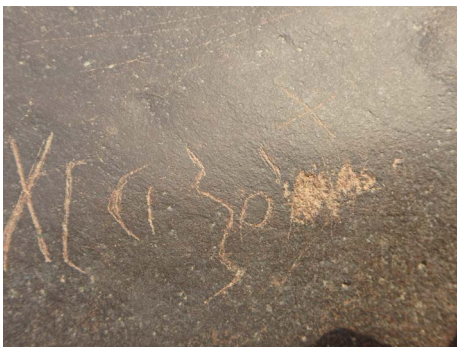
(a) Panel with effaced texts (QUR 2.399)

(b) Fully scratched over but still legible text (QUR 148.21.3/C)

(c) Effaced name and camel head (QUR 2.428.1/C)

(d) Completely erased text (QUR 294.55.4/C)

(e) Detail of corrected text part in QUR 171.112.1/C

(f) Text with scratched out dittography of *bn* 'son of' (QUR 913.2.1/C)

Figure 7.2: Examples of effacement

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text which leaves the effaced part out in order to avoid ambiguity as to where the text starts. Cases such as this suggest that a portion of the effacement found in the JQC may have been done by the authors themselves who perhaps were not satisfied with the result.

7.2 Modification

Many texts are affected by modifications of various sorts, which for the Safaitic authors were probably part of the category of effacement (*ʿwr*). A typical type of modification was closing the prongs of *h*, *ʾ*, and *ṣ* by adding a bar or by filling them in, which turned the first into a *y* and the other two into a *ṯ*. Another widespread way of altering graphs was the addition of horizontal bars across their middle, by means of which one could for example turn a *b* or a *s¹* into a *ḫ*, and a *g* into a *w*. These are just some examples as many other types of modification are attested. Texts that went through such modifications are often very challenging to read, because one cannot always distinguish modified parts from the original strokes of the graphs. However, as we shall see in some of the examples below, in the fortunate cases in which one of the possible readings corresponds to already attested authors, one can provide a more plausible interpretation. Occasionally, this can also be corroborated by similarities in writing style, as for example in the case of the modified text QUR 2.493.3/C = WH 3915, which appears to be by the prolific author *grmt bn nʾlt* (see below).

The panel QUR 2.493/C (Fig. 7.3(a)) provides a good sample of modifications, as it is covered by heavily altered inscriptions. Excluding the second text from the top (QUR 2.493.2/C), which was effaced,[522] all others have been damaged by adding marks which change the graphematic value of the graphs.

In the first text from top, QUR 2.493.1/C = WH 3913 *l ʿmr {{b}}n {{g}}rm w nẓr h-s¹my* 'By ʿmr {son of} {Grm} and he awaited the rains',[523] the name is emphasised by being hammered and carved in bigger graphs than the narrative part, which has been incised.[524] The *b* has been turned into a *s¹* by attaching a bar to its back, and the *g* into a *w* through the addition of a horizontal line.

The third inscription (QUR 2.493.3/C = WH 3915) has been interpreted by previous editors as a text by a female author,[525] but I would suggest that it rather provides another interesting example of modified text. The *g* has been turned into a *w* through a horizontal bar and another bar crosses the *n* of *bn* – hence the interpretation of *bn* 'son of' as *bnt* 'daughter of' rejected here – and it joins it to the following *n* of the patronym *nʾlt*, whose *ʾ* has been turned into a *ṣ* by filling in its upper fork. Moreover,

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[522]It reads: QUR 2.493.2/C = WH 3916.1 *l {ṣ}{b}{ḫ} {b}{n} {s¹}{l}m* 'By {Ṣbḫ} {son of} {S¹lm}', as also interpreted by OCIANA; this text was not read by WH. Note that two other texts with this same name and patronym were found on the same site (QUR 2.362.1/C and 2.542.4/C) and they have both been effaced as well.

[523]Both WH and OCIANA read the patronym as *wrm*, while WH does not read the statement (see OCIANA).

[524]On this phenomenon, see §5.2.

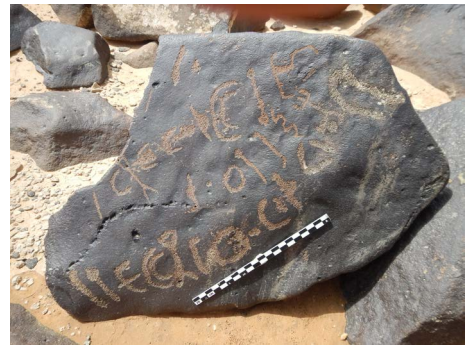[525]WH reading: *l wrmt bnt nʾrt*; OCIANA reading: *l wrmt bnt t{{ʾ}}rt*.
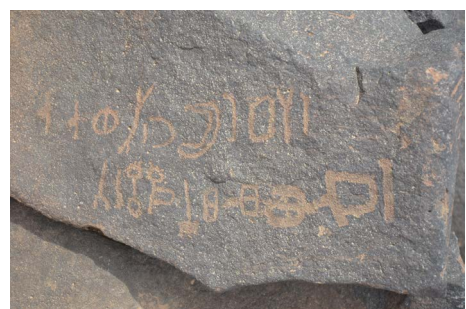
(a) QUR 2.493/C

(b) QUR 2.514.1/C = WH 3912

(c) QUR 28.18.1/C

(d) QUR 628.2

(e) QUR 372.27.1/C

(f) QUR 2.192.4/C (first text from bottom)

Figure 7.3: Examples of modification

the graph of the patronym is here read as an *l* rather than as a *r* – which may or may not have been modified through the addition of a further hook – since this way we can read the inscription as another text by *grmt bn nʾlt*. Six other texts with this name and patronym and sharing a similar writing style are found in the JQC.[526] Thus, following this reconstruction the text would read: QUR 2.493.3/C = WH 3915 *l {{g}}rmt b{{n}} {{n}}{{ʾ}}{{l}}t* 'By {Grmt} {son of} {Nʾlt}'.

The last text of the panel is QUR 2.493.3/C = WH 3916 *l {{s¹}}{{r}}{{y}} {{b}}{n} {{ḥ}}b{q} {b}{{n}} {w/g}{d}* 'By {S¹ry} {son of} {Ḥbq} {son of} {W/g}{d}'.[527] The *lām auctoris* has been partly hammered at the bottom, the *s¹* has been turned into a *ḥ*, the *r* and the *y* into a *t̠*. The *b* of the first *bn* has been turned into a *s¹* and joined through two bars to the following *n* which was effaced by a crossing line joining it to the following *ḥ*. The upper arm of the *ḥ* has been joined through a bar to the crossing line, which has in turn been joined to the following *b*, while the *q* has been effaced through hammering. A short bar crosses the *b* of the second *bn* 'son of', while another one crosses the following *n*, turning it into a *t*. Finally, the papponym *{w/g}{d}* seems to have been only effaced, although it is possible that the *w* represents a altered *g* and that the papponym should be read as *{{g}}{d}* instead. In any case, texts by a 'S¹ry son of Ḥbq' are found 9 other times in the JQC, most of which are associated to drawings. One of such texts is QUR 2.514.1/C = WH 3912 (Fig. 7.3(b)), which is discussed below.[528]

As seen in §5.3, in many cases it is difficult to determine if ligatures – i.e. dots or bars joining graphs together – were actually made by the author himself or by someone who altered the text later. For example, one of the modifications to one of the texts discussed above (QUR 2.493.3/C = WH 3915) consists of a bar crossing the *n* of *bn* to the following *n* of the patronym, hence joining the two graphs together. Because in both types of phenomena the addition of lines or dots is involved, and since they were often clearly carved after the text had been finished and mostly in a less elaborate technique, it is often challenging to reconstruct what really happened to the text. Although QUR 2.514.1/C = WH 3912 (Fig. 7.3(b)) was taken by Macdonald as an example of ligatured text of the type with a straight line going through it,[529] the roughly hammered lines

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[526]These are: QUR 64.73.1/C, 148.16.1/C, 186.33.4/C, 360.37.1/C, 449.78.1/C, 965.53.1/C. Concerning the form of the *l* with two hooks, it should be noted that in all inscriptions with this name and patronym the *l*'s are hooked, and in one of them (QUR 186.33.4/C) the *l* of the patronym has two hooks, as in the inscription discussed here. Since this graph form is rarely attested in Safaitic, and since that text has no apparent modifications, this graph does not need to have been tampered with.

[527]WH reads *l ḥrt bn ḥbq bn gl*, while OCIANA reads *l ḥ{{l}}{{y}} {{b}}{{n}} {{ḥ}}b{q} b{{n}} {g}{y}*.

[528]The remaining 8 texts are: QUR 2.248.1/C, 2.547.1/C, 148.50.1/C, 370.107.1/C, 372.47.1/C, 372.134.4/C, 683.35.1/C, 956.75.1/C.

[529]See Macdonald 1989: 66-67. His interpretation, which partly differs from the one of the present study (see below), is also followed in the OCIANA, and it reads: *l {{ʿ}}{{s¹}}{{l}}{{y}} b{{n}} {{n}}{{n}} {{b}}{{n}} {{n}}{{b}}{{q}} h-s¹{{ḥ}}{{l}}{{y}} {{w}} {{h-}} {{n}}{{q}}tn* 'By {ʿs¹ly} {son of} {Nn} {son of} {Nbq} the {S¹ḥlite} {and} {these} {two} {she-camels}'. As noted by both Macdonald and Clark 1979: 169, in WH this inscription is wrongly edited as two separate texts. Although not visible in Fig. 7.3(b), there is a further she-camel next to the left one, and it is therefore possible, as noted by Macdonald 1989: 66, that the short line on top of the tail of the right camel should be read as a *n*, and that the last word

which cross the text may equally be interpreted as a form of disruption, as they hinder the legibility of the inscription, especially of the author's genealogy. Moreover, the rock art has been partly effaced as well – see especially the head of the camel and the feet of the female ass – suggesting that the whole carving has been vandalised through hammering.

Another example of text with a straight crossing line is QUR 28.18.1/C[530] (Fig. 7.3(c)), where beside the hammered line running throughout the whole text, two graphs have been tampered with. The *{{y}}* of the patronym has been turned into a *ṣ* through the addition of a slanted bar to the shaft,[531] and the fork of the *{{ḫ-}}* has been closed by a bar. The latter type of additions of lines has been interpreted by Macdonald as a phenomenon possibly related to ligaturing as well, although he remarks that such additions 'constitute a discreet form of vandalism'.[532] Indeed, since they ultimately alter the graphematic value of graphs, they can also be interpreted as having a malicious rather than a decorative purpose.[533]

There are also examples of lines crossing only parts of the text. These are also more likely to represent effacement rather than ligatures, as for example QUR 628.2.1/C (the top text in Fig. 7.3(d)), where the name and patronym of the author have been effaced by several hammering marks, some of which are horizontal bars: see the thick line in-side the *s¹*, the short bar crossing the *ʿ* and the bar joining the *r* of the patronym to the following *b*, in this context most likely disruptive rather than decorative. Moreover, in the papponym *{{t}}s²ry*, the *{{t}}* has been turned into a *ḏ*, curiously transforming it into the divine name *ḏs²ry*,[534] while the *b* and *n* following the papponym have been merged as to form a circle, which makes them look like a *g*. This reconstruction of the original text, supported by the genealogies of other texts,[535] thus reads: *l b{ʾ}{s¹}*

should be read as the dual *nqtn*. My interpretation of the text partly differs from Macdonald, as it reads: QUR 2.514.1/C *l {s¹}{r}{y} {b}{n} {ḫ}{b}{q} {{h-}}s¹{ḥ}{l}{y} w h-nqt{n}* 'By {S¹ry} {son of} {Ḫbq} are {the} {s¹ḥly} and the two she-camels'. As seen in the discussion of QUR 2.493.4/C above, possibly by the same author, texts by an author with this same name and patronym are found 9 other times in the JQC, most of which like this one are associated to drawings. As to the word *s¹ḥly*, while it is possible that it represents a *nisbah* adjective indicating the social group of the author, as suggested by Macdonald, this same word occurs in two other rock art signatures (AbaNS 703/C and 729/C), both associated to the image of an ass; the word has therefore been interpreted by Ababneh as a noun for ass, also on account of Classical Arabic *miṣḥāl* (see Ababneh 2005:294–295). I would therefore follow Ababneh's interpretation of this word and consider it here as part of the caption, perhaps as referring to one of the two asses depicted in the associated drawing, possibly the male one on top, as the other two images associated to this word in AbaNS appear to represent male asses, although they are only known from copies.

[530]The text reads: *l ġ{r}{t} bn ḫf{{y}} {{h-}}{n}f{s¹}{t}* 'By/for {Ġrt} son of {Ḫfy} is {this} {funerary monument}'.

[531]Note also that *ḫfṣ* is so far unattested as a PN in Safaitic, while *ḫfy* is not only well attested, but also in the context of the same genealogy *ġrt bn ḫfy* (QUR 147.20.6/C, 207.37.3/C).

[532]See Macdonald 1989:65; see also King 1990a:2.E on this phenomenon in Hismaic.

[533]One may also point out that below this text on this panel there is another incised inscription (QUR 28.18.2/C) which has been fully effaced through scratching and hammering. Thus, both texts on the panel may have been vandalised using different techniques.

[534]The form of the name of this deity with the final *y* is only rarely found in Safaitic, but never in the JQC; see C.2 for a list of the divine names found in the JQC.

[535]Cf. QUR 965.48.1/C *l bʾs¹ bn dmṯr bn {t}s²ry*; QUR 802.7.2/C *l bʾs¹ bn dmṯr*; QUR 956.64.1/C *l bʾs¹ bn*

b{n} dmṯr bn {{t}}s²ry {{b}}{{n}} ʿd 'By {Bʾs¹} {son of} Dmṯr son of {Ts²ry} {son of} ʿd'.

In QUR 372.27.1/C *l n{{g}}{{ʾ}} {{b}}{{n}} qld* (Fig. 7.3(e)), the arms of the *b* of *bn* have been joined to the *n* through the addition of short bars, a well attested phenomenon which is not necessarily malicious (see §5.3). The *g*, however, has been turned into a *q* by adding two lines, and the ʾ into a ṣ by closing one fork through a bar. These additions are more likely to have been made by a vandaliser. Indeed, the joining of *bn* and the alteration of the other graphs may be the result of two different hands, the author's and the vandaliser's respectively, but unfortunately we have no way to assess the 'relative chronology' and paternity of such additions.

QUR 2.192.4/C = WH 3923 (Fig. 7.3(f)), another text from Jebel Qurma discussed in Macdonald (1989) as an instance of ligaturing, may be an example of a text with two different layers of additions, i.e. both ligaturing and later modifications. It says: *l {{b}}{{ḏ}}{{ẖ}} w {{ʿ}}w{{ḏ}} b-{{ẖ-}}{{ʾ}}lh* 'By {Bdẖ} and he {sought refuge} {in the god}'.[536] The name of the author is distinguished by thicker chiselling and is stylistically similar to the other texts by the same author.[537] Some ligatures have been added to the text: the arms of the *b* of the name have been extended to join the following *d*, whose half circle is in turn joined to the crossing line of the following *ḥ*. Some hammering joins the *w* to the following *{{ʿ}}* in a way which makes the *{{ʿ}}* readable only contextually, although it does serve the purpose of joining the two graphs together. Finally, the arms of the second *b* have been joined to the following *{{h}}*. Such ligatures may be interpreted as decorative. However, there are other hammered marks which did not necessarily have an aesthetic function and rather compromise its legibility: 1) some dots were engraved inside the *ḥ* and some hammering closes its lower arm joining it to the crossing line; 2) the fork of the *{{ḏ}}* has been completely filled in; 3) the *{{h}}* has been turned into a *y* by closing its fork; 4) the *{{ʾ}}* was turned into a *ṯ*.

7.3   Superimposition

Finally, Fig. 7.4 shows two examples of the rarest form of vandalisation: superimposition. In most cases, the superimposing carving is hammered, while the superimposed one is incised.

In Fig. 7.4(a) one can see a direct hammered 'common' script text (QUR 2.353.7/C) superimposing two incised inscriptions in the 'fine' script (QUR 2.353.8/F and 2.353.9/F).[538]

In Fig. 7.4(b), the direct hammered inscription – QUR 202.7.1/C *l ḏbʿ bn ʿzz w bkrt*

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dmṯr.

[536]I here follow the translation by Macdonald 1989:66, n.12.

[537]Most remarkably, the *lām auctoris* has a small hook, the *b* is square, and the loop of the *d* is small and made of a chisel blow (see the discussion of the writing style of this author in §6.1.6).

[538]This panel also clearly shows that while the 'fine' script started to be written later than the 'common' script, as the former developed from the latter, this does not need to imply that all 'common' texts are necessarily earlier than the 'fine' ones (see §1.1.4).

(a) QUR 2.353

(b) QUR 202.7

Figure 7.4: Examples of superimposition

'By Ḍbʿ son of ʿzz and [his is the drawing of the] young she-camel' – is carved over an incised text (QUR 202.7.2/C), which is likely the original signature of the drawing.[539] Thus, the author of the superimposed text may have claimed a drawing which he did not originally produce.

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[539]I could reconstruct the following: QUR 202.7.2/C *l ḫ{b}{ʾ} {b}n {ḫ}l{ʾ}{l} {h-}----* 'By {Ḫbʾ} {son of} {Ḫlʾl} is {the}...'.