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The Safaitic scripts: palaeography of an ancient nomadic writing culture

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Chapter 8

Final Remarks

This thesis has dealt with different aspects of the materiality of Safaitic, with a special focus on the mechanisms of graphic variation in the Safaitic script. I hope to have shown that this variation is much less idiosyncratic and spontaneous than previously thought, since it is possible to identify different levels and patterns of graphetic variation and, in the case of the ‘fine’ script, even to trace its palaeographic development across generations. This study differs from previous approaches to the palaeography of Safaitic in that it does not consider palaeography as merely an auxiliary discipline. Rather, the study of the materiality of the Safaitic script is approached as worth being pursued for its own sake.

In this final discussion, I will address three further issues which I did not get the chance to discuss in detail in the course of this study: 1) evidence for Safaitic ‘graph classes’ (according to Meletis’ 2020 definition); 2) the possible pressures for the development and graphetic features of the ‘fine’ script; 3) the relation of the ‘fine’ and of the SoS script with certain social groups and cultural regions.

8.1 Safaitic ‘graph classes’

As a unit between the basic shape and the graph, Meletis (2020) proposed the concept of *graph class*, which he uses to refer to a given typeface, style of typeface, or to someone’s handwriting, as consistent inventories. Meletis also discussed the contrastive use of different graph classes in the same context, as in the sentence ‘I do *not* believe this is true’, where, in his own words, ‘the main function of the visual feature italics or more generally, the switch to a different inventory, is to indicate a contrast, to conceptually distinguish the word printed in italics from not only the other words in the sentence but also the other paradigmatic possibilities that could have been produced in its slot, mainly the nonitalicized <not>’ (Meletis 2020:256).

Thanks to several instances of Safaitic texts in which the authors emphasised part of the text through different strategies, we are able to identify a number of Safaitic ‘graph classes’, since such examples show that certain features were in paradigmatic relationship to the features of the unmarked section of the text. In Chapter 3, which

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investigated the uses of special features – i.e. square, 90°, and elongated graph forms – I have shown examples in which such features were clearly stylistically marked, since they were used to emphasise the name and genealogy of the author.⁵⁴⁰ Further common devices to mark parts of the text, discussed in §5.2, are the use of a bigger size and/or thicker lines (usually achieved through a different carving technique), which are employed to emphasise elements in the rock art as well.

The contrastive use of features such as curvilinearity vs angularity and incision vs hammering show that they can be conceptualised as different Safaitic graph classes according to Meletis' definition. At the same time, there are no doubt some important differences between the examples of typeface writing considered by Meletis and Safaitic texts, where one finds a much higher extent of graphetic variation.

First, it is not possible to consider Safaitic graph classes as rigid inventories which stay more or less the same from text to text. Square graphs in a given script do not always have the same exact forms (as is for example the case of a given typeface), and one often finds different variants, even within the same text.

Second, in Safaitic it is not uncommon to find graph forms which should in principle belong to different graph classes – e.g. curvilinear and angular allographs – in the same text, even if the use of different forms does not seem to have any contrastive function. The only type of graph classes which almost never mix without a contrastive function are technique and size. Usually if different techniques or sizes occur within the same text this is done with the purpose of emphasising part of it. But one often finds texts in which only one or two isolated graphs are square, or turned by 90° to their usual stance, or elongated, while such features do not seem to have a clear contrastive value.

Therefore, I would loosely define Safaitic graph classes as contrastive stylistic features which can be applied in different ways depending on the author's choices.

In §3.2, I have discussed examples of texts where almost all graphs have square forms.⁵⁴¹ Similarly to the use of italics throughout a sentence in typeface writing (cf. Meletis 2020: 256), angularity in those texts clearly does not have any marking function. Thus, the choice to use the square graph class throughout the text likely had purely aesthetic purposes.

As a final note, I would like to mention that sometimes more than one marking feature are combined in the same texts and even within the same graphs, since elongated graphs or graphs turned by 90° are sometimes also square,⁵⁴² or special features are used in conjunction with a bigger size/different technique.⁵⁴³ This combined use of different graph classes may be compared to the employment of different typographic styles – such as *italics* and **bold** – *in combination*.

⁵⁴⁰It should be noted that in the 'fine' script, where elongation is a consistent feature of the inventory – and the basic shapes of *s*¹ and *h* are consistently turned by 90° – in the cases in which authors wished to emphasise their name and genealogy, they mainly resorted to bigger and/or square graphs; see, e.g., WH 1673/F (Fig. 3.5(b)).

⁵⁴¹E.g. Ms 64/SoS (Fig.3.4(a)), AAEK 133/SoS (Fig. 3.4(b)), RMSK 1/F (Fig. 3.5(d)).

⁵⁴²E.g. the *b*'s of the genealogy in QUR 186.162.1/C (Fig. 3.2(a)), which are square and turned by 90°.

⁵⁴³See, e.g., QUR 12.34.1/C (Fig. 3.3(b)), where the first name of the author is distinguished by finely chiselled and elongated graphs which are also larger than the graphs of the patronym.

8.2 On the development of the ‘fine’ script

As shown in Chapter 4, the ‘fine’ script is the result of a gradual development from the ‘common’ script, which featured the increasing compression of the ‘common’ inventory. Most texts in the ‘fine’ script are incised (§4.1),⁵⁴⁴ and it is likely that the distinctive pointed and compressed shapes characterising the ‘fine’ inventory developed through the use of incising rather than hammering, as the latter technique is not ideal for carving graph forms with such features.⁵⁴⁵ In light of this, one may argue that an important pressure for the development of the ‘fine’ script was the consistent use of this carving technique at some point. Yet it should be stressed that there is nothing intrinsically ‘fine’ about incising, since this technique is employed in a great number of texts in the ‘common’ script as well. Thus, it is more likely that authors purposefully used incision in order to obtain more pointed and compressed forms rather than incision alone being the trigger of such features.

‘Fine’ texts have on average longer narratives and genealogies than ‘common’ ones, and it appears that *df* authors began to write long genealogies consistently around the same time in which we start to see the palaeographic development from the ‘common’ to the ‘fine’ script, a practice which was continued and expanded for several generations, with texts showing up to 16 generations-long genealogies (see Appendix A).

It is therefore possible that the development of compressed shapes was motivated by the purpose of allowing increasingly larger amounts of text on the limited writing space provided by basalt rocks.

8.3 The sociocultural contexts of the ‘fine’ and of the SoS script

An interesting aspect which has not been explored in depth in this study is the relationship of the ‘fine’ and of the SoS script with certain social groups and cultural regions.

In comparison to the ‘common’ script, the ‘fine’ and the SoS script appear as much more limited and localised phenomena. The territory in which the majority of ‘fine’ texts are found are the northern-most regions of the Syro-Jordanian Ḥarrah east and south-east of the Ḥawrān, while texts in the SoS script are scattered across different regions of the Nabataean cultural area. In addition, ‘fine’ and SoS texts express more often affiliations to social groups than ‘common’ ones, which allows us to identify some correlations between the use of these scripts and certain social groups.

A great number of texts in the ‘fine’ script are by members of the lineage of *df*. The second most common social group associated with the ‘fine’ script is the lineage of *wḏ*,

⁵⁴⁴Although hammered ‘fine’ texts do exist (e.g. HASI 12/F and HASI 13/F), they do not seem to occur very often.

⁵⁴⁵In Chapter 6, we have seen that the incised texts by *qdm* – the grandfather of prolific ‘fine’ script author *mgd bn zd* – are all rather compressed, but there is an hammered text (BES15 886/F) which appears as visibly less compressed, although it still keeps typical ‘fine’ shapes (see §6.2.4.1).

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which appears to have been connected to *df* by some sort of relationship (see §B.1).⁵⁴⁶ As pointed out above, the vast majority of ‘fine’ texts are concentrated in the proximity of the Ḥawrān. The connection to this region, in particular its northern part, is also shown by other types of cultural cues, as for example a group of ‘fine’ texts dated to Herodian rulers,⁵⁴⁷ the frequent invocations to the deity *bʿlsʿmn* ‘Baalshamin’ (cf. his temple at Siʿ in the northern Ḥawrān⁵⁴⁸), and the Safaitic-Greek bilinguals,⁵⁴⁹ which further indicate proximity to the Hellenised cultural setting of the northern Ḥawrān.

Concerning the SoS script, there seems to be a relation of this script with several social groups (e.g. *ʿmrt*, *rwḥ*, *bsʿ*, and *ʿkt*⁵⁵⁰) as well as with certain regions of the Nabataean cultural area. Several SoS texts are found in the proximity of the Nabataean centres along and connected by the Wādī Sirḥān stretching from Dūmah⁵⁵¹ up to the southern Ḥawrān. This geographic distribution is also reflected by a number of cultural and sociolinguistic cues, such as inscriptions dated to the regnal years of Rabbel II (see §1.1.4), SoS/Nabataean bilinguals,⁵⁵² and the use of expressions which appear to be calques from the Nabataean.⁵⁵³

⁵⁴⁶Moreover, it should be noted that among the other groups employing the ‘fine’ script, some are clearly or potentially sub-groups of *df* (see §A.1.1) or of *ʿwḏ* (see §B.2).

⁵⁴⁷See the examples discussed in §4.2; Macdonald 1995; Macdonald 2014.

⁵⁴⁸On references to Siʿ in the Safaitic inscriptions, see Macdonald 2003b; cf. also Bennett’s 2014 observation that most invocations to this deity seem to be concentrated in northern areas of the Ḥarrah (Bennett 2014:48).

⁵⁴⁹See, e.g., WH 1849/F and WH 1860/Gr (see Macdonald 1993:347), and the bilinguals published in Al-Jallad and Al-Manaser (2016).

⁵⁵⁰For a complete list of the social groups associated with the SoS script in the JQC, see Appendix C.

⁵⁵¹On the connections of the SoS texts from the Dūmah region with the Nabataeans, see Norris 2018:86–88.

⁵⁵²See the bilingual from Dūmah in northern Saudi Arabia (Norris 2018:86–87) and the bilingual from Bāyir in southern Jordan (Al-Khraysheh 1994).

⁵⁵³See, e.g., AAEK 133/SoS *l ʿsʿ bn rwḥ ḏ ʿl ʿmrt sʿlm* ‘By ʿsʿ son of Rwḥ of the people of ʿmrt, may he be secure’. This is probably a calque of the Nabataean formula consisting of the name of the author preceded or followed by *šlm* ‘May he be safe and sound’ (see Macdonald 2003a:40); see Norris 2018:86 for a discussion of the examples from the Dūmah region.