

## THREE SAFAITIC STONES FROM JORDAN

by  
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Presented here are three stones bearing pre-Islamic inscriptions of the type sometimes called "Safaitic/Thamudic". These are, it would seem, to be considered as Safaitic, not Thamudic. The writer is grateful to Dr. Adnan Hadidi, the director of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, and to Mr. Umar Yunis of the Madaba office of the Department, together with the staff of that office, for making these stones available for study during December 1979.

1. An inscribed stone said to be from the vicinity of Dhiban in Moab. It was recently acquired by the Department of Antiquities. The stone is a rough limestone block, with one smooth face, on which is text 1a, and a rough face, on which is text 1b. (Amman Museum registration No. J14099) (Pl. LXXXI, 1, 3)

a. *l mkr bn rš't w ḏkrt lt jmr w s'ḏ'l w w'l*  
*w ḥlf w fš w ʕsm w lws w ḥzmt w 'sd w ṭrmlh*  
*w 'ys w bn'mt*

"By MKR son of RŠ'T. And may Lat remember JMR and S'ḏ'L and W'L and ḤLF and FŠ and ʕSM and LWS and ḤZMT and 'SD and ṬRMLH and 'YS and BN'MT."

This text has been enclosed by a fine line, which is intersected at one spot by seven short strokes, a typical Safaitic device. This is clearly a memorial inscription, calling upon the goddess Allat (Lat) to remember no less than twelve individuals.

MKR is found in C 387, and as an element of the compound name BNMKR in TIJ 496, which is Safaitic not Thamudic. RŠ'T is a new name; see the Ar. *raša'a*, "to bring forth (of a gazelle)". This name also occurs in CNSI 99.

The expression *w ḏkrt lt* is usual. Note here, however, that the letter *w* has been inscribed below the line. Evidently it was originally omitted by the scribe and inserted later. JMR is a well known Safaitic name, which does not occur in Thamudic. Although fairly certain here it is not read with absolute conviction. The letter *m* has been inscribed over a crack in the stone, while the letter *r* appears to have been inscribed over the top of another letter, possibly *z*, which may have been inscribed in error. One could also read ʕMR here, rather than JMR.

LWS is a new name. HIn lists a name LWSM for Minaean, which would be the equivalent of this Safaitic name. See the Ar. *lasa*, "to be fond of sweetmeats, to taste".

ḤZMT is likewise a new name; see the Ar. *ḥazama*, "to pack up, bundle", or *ḥazima*, "to choke".

ṬRMLH occurs only twice, both times in the same inscription, TIJ 483, which is Safaitic, not Thamudic.

BN'MT is new, although the element 'MT is found (HIn 73).

The script of this text is recognisably Safaitic, or what Winnett has termed "Tabuki Thamudic" (see F.V. Winnett and W.L. Reed, *Ancient Records from North Arabia*, p. 69-70). This differs from the more northerly Safaitic, script in the form of the letters *ḏ* and *z*, in this case. Here the letter *l* is of the hooked type, while *n* is a short horizontal stroke. *b* and *r* are virtually indistinguishable, except that *b* appears to be slightly larger. (Pl. LXXXI, 3)

b. *l ḡnm w bn'r*

"By GNM and BN'R".

This is on the reverse side of the stone. The text is partially enclosed by a line. It appears to represent a case of joint authorship, which is unusual in Safaitic. Alternatively we may read "By GNMW son 'R", considering GNMW to be a name of Nabataean type. The name BN'R would be new, although the element 'R is found in Safaitic and possibly in Thamudic (HIn 35, to which entry add WH 1813, 2731 and 2933). Note that the stance of the letter *m* has been reversed here.

The engraving of both of these texts is similar. The letters were formed by the incision of a close series of v-shaped cuts with a chisel-like implement. In text 1a this chisel appears to have slipped a number of times, resulting in a number of extraneous strokes on the stone surface.

2. An inscribed stone in the Madaba Museum, of unknown provenance. There are two texts on the same face of this stone but it has been so badly weathered that they are difficult to make out. The stone has evidently been standing upon its edge in the ground, probably as a gravestone. (Madaba Museum registration No. 297). (Pl. LXXXII, 1,3)

a. 1. (...) *b(n) byn ḏkrt l(t) jr w 'sll*  
*(w 'b. w) 'bṣr w (qr<sup>c</sup>)*

“By (...) son (of) BYN. And may Lat remember  
 JD and 'SLL (and... and) 'BṢR(?) and (QR<sup>c</sup>)”.

After the initial lam auctoris it is impossible to make out anything but slight traces of the letters of the initial name. The *b* of the following *bn*, if such it is, is clear but the *n* is not. The second name may be BYN, a name known only from WH 38. However, there may have been another letter between *b* and *y*, although no trace of one can be detected. The letter *n* of BYN and the following *w* have been inscribed one above the other in the space between *y* and *ḏ*, as if one of them had originally been omitted. As the *w* is small and cramped it would appear that it was originally overlooked. One would expect the divine name LT to follow. Here the 1 is clear but the *t* can only be read with difficulty. The peculiar sign on the stone at this point appears to be a combination of the letters *ḡ* and *t*. Presumably the *ḡ* was an error and the letter *t* was inscribed over it.

The name which follows is read here as JR (HIn 57) but it may also be read as <sup>c</sup>R (H1n (414)). Both names occur only in Safaitic. The letter read as *r* resembles some forms of *s* but it differs significantly from the following *s* of 'SLL. 'SLL is a new name; see the Ar, 'asalla, “to afflict someone with consumption (God)”.

The next line of the text is extremely difficult to make out, as it is badly worn. Another name, introduced by *w*, seems to follow. The initial letters of this may be 'B or 'S but the third letter is illegible. The following letters may be another personal name, 'BṢR, which would be new, a compound of a well known Arabic type. The end of the text is virtually illegible but it may contain another name, which may be read as QR<sup>c</sup>, which is unknown; see the Ar. qara<sup>c</sup>a, “to beat, hit”, or qari<sup>c</sup>a, “to be bald”. (Pl. LXXXII, 1, 3)

b. 1 <sup>c</sup>*d w w<sup>c</sup>d w yslm w '(ṭ)d w <sup>c</sup>(ḏ.....)' (...)*

“By <sup>c</sup>D. And he was threatened and may he be kept safe. And (.....)”.

This text has been badly damaged. Much of the second line has been lost, as a piece has been broken from the stone. At least six letters are entirely missing here and as many as seven more have been more or less partially destroyed. The beginning has been damaged by the chipping of the rock surface but the author's name may be <sup>c</sup>D, which is Safaitic. The verb which follows appears to be *w<sup>c</sup>d*, rather than the better known *wjd*, as the middle letter is rather small to be *j*. Furthermore the verb *wjd* would have no apparent object here. For *w<sup>c</sup>d* see the Ar. *wa<sup>c</sup>ida*, “to threaten, make a promise”. In view of the following jussive verb *yslm*, “may he be kept safe”, the former sense of his verb seems appropriate. The author is appealing to some unnamed deity for protection. The remainder of the text is fragmentary.

3. An inscribed stone in the Madaba Museum, of unknown provenance. The flat surface of this limestone block has been damaged in a number of places by the scouring of the rock but the majority of the letters are clear. After being incised this stone was evidently left standing upon its edge in the ground, probably as a tombstone. (Madaba Museum registration No. 507). (Pl. LXXXII, 2, 3)

1 *ṣhḥ bn wd dyl n'lt w ḏkrt lt kll rhḥ ṣdq*

“By ṢHḤ son of WD, of the tribe of N'lt.

And may Lat remember the condition of the spirit of a true friend.”

This text presents a number of difficulties. The initial name has been clearly written as ṢHH, which is an impossible name. (On the photograph it looks like ṢYH, but an examination of the stone itself reveals that the fork of the letter *h* is not closed, there being a fortuitous mark on the rock here). It should probably be read as ṢYH, which is a well known Safaitic personal name, on the assumption that the author made a mistake while engraving the text.

The expression *dyl n'lt* is peculiar. No satisfactory sense can be made of it unless we read *dyl* as *d'l*, although the stone clearly shows *dyl*. Should we then assume that the author has made another mistake at this point? One hesitates to accept this explanation but, nevertheless, cases of error on the part of an ancient author are not unknown and it may well be that this author has confused the the letters 'alif, *h* and *y*, although 'alif appears quite normally in the tribal name N'LT. This is new a a tribal name, although it may occur in WH 2569 as a personal name. The expression *dkrt lt* is usual but what follows is again problematic. *Kll* may be equated with the Ar. *kalal*, "state, condition", or *kalal*, "weariness". A reading "all, every" is not likely. *rhḥ* should probably be read as *ryḥ*, assuming an error here similar to that in the initial name. This may be the equivalent of the Ar. *rūḥ*, "breath, spirit, soul". (Note that on the photograph this appears to be *r'h*, but the middle letter is clearly *h* on the stone. A chip on the stone surface at the top of this letter is not a part of it. Likewise the letter *h* appears to be *h* from the photograph. However, the diagonal mark is a scouring on the stone surface, which extends beyond the letter, which is faint).

*ṣdq* is to be compared to the Ar. *ṣadiq*, "a true friend", and to the Safaitic *ḥbb*, which is found in many texts with a similar meaning - "a loved one".

Does this text then provide evidence that at least some of the nomadic authors of these texts held a belief that the spirit of a deceased person continued in some kind of a post-mortem existence? Unfortunately, as the reading of the text cannot be made with absolute certainty we cannot be definite on this point. However, the oft repeated formula *dkrt lt*, in contexts which are apparently funerary, would tend to indicate that some such belief existed, among the southern tribes at least. As yet no similar conclusion can be drawn concerning the more northerly tribes, the traditional "Safaitic" bedouin. As such beliefs were prevalent among other peoples of the region at that time it need not to be surprising to discover such sentiments expressed as are postulated for this text.

Both of the Madaba Museum stones have been incised by pecking the surface of he stone with a chisel-like implement. In the case of most of the letters the marks made by this are very clear. Its end seems to have been about 1mm in width and it was employed so as to produce a series of short diagonal marks, thus : ///. Each blow lifted out a small piece of the stone face, leaving a low ridge between each mark. The thickness of each chip was approximately .25mm. These individual marks were then joined together by the drawing of the chisel point through them.

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The question now arises as to whether these inscriptions should properly be considered to be Safaitic or Thamudic. Traditionally three factors would lead to their being classified as Thamudic:

1. Their geographical provenance, from a region considered to be at northern limit of the Thamudic "carrying rights" (see G.L.Harding, "Safaitic Inscriptions from Tapline in Jordan", *ADAJ*, Vol.XVII, 1972, p.5). Stone No. 1 is from the region of Dhiban, while Nos. 2 & 3 are presumably from the vicinity of Madaba, both of which areas are far removed from the traditional area of the Safaitic peoples in the basalt regions of the north.
2. The shapes of the letters, particularly *d*, *ḍ* and *z*, of these inscriptions are all shapes usually attributed to the Thamudic script but which are not usually found in the more northerly Safaitic script.
3. The nature of the inscriptions themselves tends to group them with the southern, Thamudic texts. Two of these were clearly gravestones, displaying clear signs of having been originally set upon edge in the ground. Such a practice is not usually found in the north, where cairns were

erected over the dead. Furthermore, texts 1a, 2a and 3 employ the expression *w dkr̄t lt*, which is not to be found in the more northerly, Safaitic inscriptions.

However, this type of text, which Winnett would classify as “Tabuki Thamudic” (see F.V. Winnett & W.L.Reed, *op.cit.*, p. 69-70), begin with the *lam auctoris*, a device employed almost universally in Safaitic. In this they differ markedly from many other Thamudic texts, some of which employ the word *zn* to introduce the inscription. Such texts are usually in Winnett’s “Hijazi” or “Najadi” Thamudic script, in which the letter forms and the contents of the texts themselves often diverge significantly from those classified as “Tabuki” Thamudic and any relationship between the two groups is a distant one. On the other hand, the relationship between the Safaitic and the “Tabuki” Thamudic inscriptions is very clear. The script is almost identical, as is the onomasticon, the expression and the content of the texts. Furthermore, the geographical division between them is more imagined than real. Many texts which are indistinguishable from Safaitic have been found in traditional “Thamudic” areas, in northern Saudi Arabia and Wadi Rum. The assumed geographical discontinuity between the two groups is due partly to lack of exploration in desert areas of Jordan between Azraq and Wadi Rum and perhaps partly due to a lack of suitable stone for the inscribing of texts in this region. Many of the texts published as Thamudic by Harding (see his *some Thamudic Inscriptions from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*, Leiden, 1952) cannot be distinguished from others published as Safaitic. In fact no distinction is to be made. Harding himself was ready to admit this, at least in part, before his untimely death in February, 1979. In his “Safaitic Inscriptions from Tapline in Jordan” (*op. cit.*, p.5) he stated his belief that the texts “WTI 11, 12 ?, 16-17?, 18-19, 33?, 39 and 55 from Sakaka, and 81-84 from Ithrah are really Safaitic on the basis of their content”. In fact many more of these inscriptions published by Winnett should probably be considered Safaitic. The differences which may be observed in both script and content may be attributed to regional and tribal factors rather than to significant political, linguistic or ethnic divisions in North Arabian tribal society. The Safaitic and “Tabuki” Thamudic inscriptions form an homogeneous group.

Of course, neither the terms “Safaitic” nor “Thamudic” are entirely appropriate, “Safaitic” being of geographical rather than of ethnic or linguistic derivation, and “Thamudic” being derived from the association of the tribe of Thamud of the Qur’an with the originators of the inscriptions found in northern Arabia. There is no direct evidence that the Qur’anic Thamud did in fact ever use the Thamudic script. In our present state of knowledge, and in the absence of more appropriate nomenclature, it is this writer’s opinion that, in order to distinguish between the two widely different groups of inscriptions - the Najdi/Hijazi Thamudic and the Safaitic/Tabuki Thamudic - the term Thamudic should be applied to the former and Safaitic to the latter.

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#### Abbreviations :

- Ar. Arabic
- C. Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum, Pars V, Tomus I, Paris, 1950.
- CNSI V.A. Clark, *A Study of New Safaitic Inscriptions from Jordan*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Melbourne, 1979.
- (HIn G. Lankester Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions*, Toronto, 1971.
- TIJ G. Lankester Harding, *Some Thamudic Inscriptions from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*, Leiden, 1952.
- WH F.V. Winnett & G.L. Harding, *Inscriptions from Fifty Safaitic Cairns*, Toronto, 1978.
- WTI Thamudic inscriptions in F.V. Winnett & W.L.Reed, *Ancient Records from North Arabia*, Toronto, 1970.