

The Distribution of Safaitic Inscriptions in Northern Jordan

It is clear from the content of the Safaitic inscriptions that the vast majority of their authors were bedouin and, perhaps, semi-nomads.¹ Although a handful of texts have been found in towns such as Buşra² and Umm aj-Jimal,³ Littmann's remark that "the fewer the traces of real civilization are, the more numerous are the Safaitic inscriptions" (Littmann 1904: 104) still holds good in general.

The nomadic authors of these texts ranged over a large area of southern Syria, northern and eastern Jordan, and northern Saudi Arabia. Isolated inscriptions have been found northwest of Palmyra, as far west as Waşta between Tyre and Sidon, as far south as Ha'il, and as far east as Wadi Hauran in Iraq. However, the vast majority occur in the deserts of southern Syria and northern Jordan. The fact that their authors were nomadic and that, with the exception of some cairns and the presence of their names outside their normal context,⁴ these graffiti are the only record of their presence in any particular place, obviously affects both the way we look at the distribution of texts and the inferences we draw from it.

Inevitably, the places where they are found are restricted to the places where they have been sought. Thus, although the 19th century explorers, who first discovered these texts in southern Syria, made it quite clear that they can be found on any rocks or stones suitable for inscribing,⁵ the search for them in Jordan has, until recently, concentrated on obvious landmarks such as ridges, outcrops, and above all cairns. This has distorted considerably our picture of the distribution of the Safaitic texts in Jordan and ultimately led to Oxtoby's now notorious claims that Safaitic inscriptions are to be found mainly at "cairns and only occasional-

ly elsewhere" (Oxtoby 1968: 1). What lies behind this, of course, is that the expedition of which he was a member, and which was ultimately to result in the book entitled *Inscriptions from Fifty Safaitic Cairns*, concentrated its searches on these structures and looked "only occasionally elsewhere". The distortion of the distribution pattern evident in Oxtoby's view of course becomes self-perpetuating when in order "to gain further information about the Safaitic tribes one's method is to explore the desert for additional cairns" (*ibid*: 2)!

Since the relationship of Safaitic inscriptions to cairns has become a vexed issue⁶ it is worth examining the evidence in detail. The majority of Safaitic texts are to be found in the Ḥarra, an area covered by countless millions of basalt stones and boulders. It is probable that as long as they have lived there men have been building cairns for a variety of purposes: camp and field clearance, hides for hunting or spying out the land,⁷ memorials of important events,⁸ etc. Thus, the period over which cairns have been built in the Ḥarra is likely to have been an extremely long one and it is usually impossible to assign a particular cairn to a specific period with any certainty. Moreover, there is clear evidence that cairns have been used and re-used at different times for a variety of purposes. Thus, for example, a cairn may have originally been erected over a burial or to mark an event but, because it is in a suitable position, is later used as a hide, or may gain a religious or magical significance and, as is very common with large cairns associated with historical or legendary figures, attract "satellite graves" around it.

Because the Safaitic inscriptions are the only written records left by the inhabitants of the Ḥarra before the

¹The suggestion was made during the conference that a recently discovered drawing of a man ploughing accompanied by a Safaitic text showed that some at least of these authors were not bedouin. However, it is well-known that bedouin will from time to time sow opportunistically and one Safaitic text (C 4985) shows that its author was, in this sense, both an agriculturalist and a pastoralist: *w slḥ h-'bl mḍbr w zr' h-rḥbt* "and he drove [cf. Heb. *šālah* "to send forth"] the camels into the desert and he sowed the Ruḥba".

²These are not yet published but are mentioned in Sartre 1985: 148.

³LP 1269-1279.

⁴That is, for instance, in Greek transcription at such places as Buşra, see Sartre 1985: 147-148.

⁵See, for instance, Graham 1858: 236; Wetzstein 1860: 67; de Vogüé 1868-77: 139, etc.

⁶See, for instance, Harding 1953: 8-12; Jamme 1970: 323-334; 1971: 42-43; Harding 1978; Jamme 1979: 491-498; Clark 1979: 42-43; and 1981.

⁷See, for example, Musil 1928: 191.

⁸Compare Genesis 31: 45-54 and Zayadine 1980: 108.

present, they are our only "historical" source for the building and use of cairns in the area, albeit for a relatively brief period of its history. The excavation of four cairns⁹ has added to our knowledge to some extent, though inevitably it has raised as many questions as it has answered.

It is clear that the Safaitic bedouins built cairns. It is also clear that they built them over graves. These two facts are generally accepted. However, because Professor Jamme has refused to accept the second, it may be as well to cite the evidence briefly. In Arabic the word *raġam* means stones piled up over a grave, i.e. a cairn, and hence the grave itself. In Safaitic it is clear from the way the word is used that it had a very similar range of meanings. It almost always occurs in one of two expressions, either *l N h rgm* "the cairn is so-and-so's" or *bny l' l N h rgm* "he built the cairn for/over so-and-so". This is usually accompanied, either in the same text or in others on the same cairn, by expressions of mourning (*wgm*, *wlh*, *ndm*, etc.) for the person mentioned in the *bny* texts. At WH Cairn 12, three texts describe finding the body of a certain *ġyr'l* (*wgd gtt ġyr'l*), two more say they buried him (*w qbr ġyr'l*), two others that they built a cairn (*w bny hrgm*, *w bny l ġyr'l*), while one other, presumably later, states that he discovered his grave (*wgd qbr ġyr'l*).

At the most famous "Safaitic cairn", that of Hani' near Šafawi, 82 of the texts¹⁰ refer either to building or mourning for him. The cairn was large and apparently undisturbed, and Gerald Lankester Harding's excavations revealed a single intact burial beneath it.¹¹ But it is clear that this cairn is quite exceptional, and is unique in having a large number of texts mentioning the dead man. Even on cairns which almost certainly cover a Safaitic burial generally only a tiny minority of the texts have to do with its construction or even refer to the deceased.¹²

It is clear from the Safaitic evidence that it was relatively rare for a cairn to be used only once and for one purpose. More often they were used and re-used, as the intrusive burials in those excavated by Clark (1981) show. This is also suggested by WH Cairn 7, for example, where one text records the building of cairns (*'rgm*), four the construction of a *bly*,¹³ one is the memorial stone (*nfst*) of another individual, and six describe it as a look-out point (*mzr*). There are numerous other examples of cairns on which inscriptions record the different uses to which they have

been put, or the different structures of which the stones on which they are written have formed part. Many have been built into shelters (*zlt*, *strt*) or enclosures (*zrt*), or have been used as grave markers (*nfst*) or standing stones (*nšb*) before being incorporated into the cairns in which we find them.

The fact that one or more stones on a cairn bear Safaitic inscriptions does not therefore indicate that the cairn is necessarily of Safaitic origin. Conversely, texts which probably were originally part of a cairn may now be found used in a different structure. A curious example of this is Clark's Site F,¹⁴ where all the inscriptions were found on stones used in a low wall. This bordered the southern edge of a cleared area in which stood a large cairn of indeterminate age on which there were no inscriptions. Of the 18 texts at this site one mentions the cairn of a woman called 'd, five others say their authors built over her, and others mourn for her. It is therefore possible that her cairn was dismantled to build the wall and that the present anepigraphic cairn belongs to another period. By contrast, on WH Cairn 46 there are 488 inscriptions not one of which mentions the words *rgm* or *bny*. Three texts claim a shelter (*strt*) and one,¹⁵ possibly, a sheepfold (*tyt*), but apart from these no other structures are mentioned; and this is typical of many cairns. The multiple uses to which cairns could be put no doubt encouraged a gradual accumulation of inscriptions on them.

But while on some cairns there are very large numbers of texts, cairns play a relatively small part in the distribution patterns of the Safaitic inscriptions in general. For as the field-work at Jawa of the Corpus of the Inscriptions of Jordan Project of Yarmouk University and the Department of Antiquities has conclusively demonstrated, inscriptions can be found on any stone or boulder capable of being inscribed, whether it is in an outcrop, a structure, or merely one of the millions littering the desert floor. Once preconceptions about where texts occur are abandoned and a systematic survey is made of a well-defined area, a much truer picture can be obtained of their distribution on a local level. Because at Jawa we recorded all inscriptions, drawings and *wusûm*, including the modern, and noted their locations with great precision, we can now make plans of the area showing the distribution of the Safaitic, Greek, early Arabic and modern Arabic inscriptions as well as the rock-drawings and *wusûm*. One of the many interesting

⁹See Harding 1953 and 1978, and Clark 1981.

¹⁰That is over half of the inscriptions found on the cairn itself, see Harding 1953: 8-9, 12, 14.

¹¹There was a subsidiary burial, of a woman, to the south, but this was clearly intrusive, for it was lined and covered with stones which must have been taken from the cairn, since almost all of them refer to Hani' (Harding 1953: 11, add to the list given there nos. 23 and 117). Jamme (1979: 492) is incorrect when he asserts that "G.L. Harding never submitted the skeleton from his so-called Hani's [sic] tomb to scientific analyses in order to ascertain both its date and the sex of the person it belongs to". The report of the scientific analyses on both skulls and some of the long bones, by W.M. Shanklin and A.J. Dark, was published in the *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 2, 1953, 57-61, immediately after Harding's own article. There the sex of each skeleton is established and it is explained why a precise date could not be arrived at.

¹²For instance, of the almost 500 inscriptions on WH Cairn 9 (the "Cairn of Sa'd"), only 11 refer to him. Moreover, there are two others, possibly brought from elsewhere, carved to mark the tombs (*swy*) of other individuals.

¹³Possibly the pit in which was placed a *baliyya*, i.e. a camel which was trussed and left to starve to death at the grave of its master.

¹⁴Clark 1979: 37 and nos. 407-424. For descriptions of similar structures see Jamme 1971: 43 at Badanah and Littmann 1904: 104 at al-Hifneh (though he does not mention cairns).

¹⁵Three others may refer to a sheep-fold blowing away, though in all four cases the interpretation is very doubtful.

results of this exercise is that it demonstrates that the Safaitic and early and modern Arabic texts, (there are only a handful of Greek), are not confined to obvious places such as outcrops, cairns, the edges of pools, etc., but are widely scattered over the area. However, the distribution pattern is almost identical for each of these groups of texts. The modern shepherd boys who have been taught to read and write in the government schools leave their graffiti in almost exactly the same places as the Safaitic bedouins before them. This does not mean that they are necessarily written on the same rock but in the close vicinity. In some cases these are places which afford a good view, in others where there is shade and shelter, but others are in flat open country where after the rains there is good grazing.

While it is true that one graffito attracts others, this cannot explain such an extensive match of the distribution patterns of the Safaitic and early and modern Arabic inscriptions. On the other hand, the way the modern inhabitants use the area and the distribution of the inscriptions which results, strongly suggests that their Safaitic predecessors, whose inscriptions have an almost identical distribution, may have used the resources of the area in a very similar way.

Naturally, large numbers of inscriptions are also found on natural or man-made features. Thus at Jawa one large outcrop with a commanding view yielded over 300 inscriptions and drawings, while at Saja, a conical hill surrounded by wadis near Jabal 'Uneizah, over 200 were found. Jabal Qarma and Tell Fara, on the lower reaches of Wadi Rajil, may well have been points at which huntsmen kept watch for migrating game. Wadis with deep gorges, like Wadi Rajil, Wadi Şafawi and Wadi Irenbeh, to take a few at random, where pools remain after the rains and shelter can be found in caves and under overhanging rocks, also yield numerous inscriptions. Again the pattern is the same, a mixture of Safaitic with early and modern Arabic.

Thus, looking at distribution on the smallest scale, the places where Safaitic inscriptions are found, it is clear that they occur, in greater or lesser numbers, almost anywhere that the rock is suitable for inscribing. Often one stone among the millions on the desert floor has been picked out and inscribed, while those around are untouched. Others occur in groups, again for no discernible reason at this distance of time. In other places, high points, outcrops, around pools or in wadi gorges, large numbers of texts can be found together, and here the reasons are more obvious. In all these cases, and particularly when they are on cliffs or immovable boulders, the texts can be said to be *in situ* and conclusions drawn from their distribution.

By contrast, on cairns there can be no certainty of the relationship between an inscription and its context. While

with a huge and apparently undisturbed cairn on which over half the inscriptions mention one man, it is a fairly safe assumption that the body beneath it belonged to the person referred to in the texts, it must never be forgotten that this *can* only be an assumption. In fact, it not only frequently *is* forgotten but the relationship between texts on a cairn and bodies beneath it is often extended to much more doubtful cases. As mentioned above, of the almost 500 inscriptions at WH Cairn 9, only 11 actually mention Sa'd and it may well be that Sa'd's original cairn was demolished and the inscriptions mentioning him re-used with others to cover a later burial nearby. I do not wish to endorse the extreme position adopted by Professor Jamme, but merely to make the distinction between the often doubtful provenance of texts on a cairn and those which can be said unequivocally to be *in situ*.

The distribution of the Safaitic tribes cannot at present be described in any detail. Relatively few texts give the author's tribal affiliation and in those that do, with one or two exceptions, the same word ('l, Arabic 'âl) is used for all social groupings from family to tribe. Here again, inscriptions gathered together on cairns can distort our understanding of tribal distribution. For instance, among the 173 texts at or around the Cairn of Hani', membership is claimed of 20 different 'ls. Of these, members of 6 were involved in Hani's obsequies, again an unusual number. By comparison, no 'ls are mentioned in the texts concerned with the burials of Sa'd (WH Cairn 9) and Gyr'l (Cairn 12), only the tribe of the dead woman, Hrg, at Clark 1981: Cairn 2; the tribe of the dead woman plus one other at that of 'd (CSNS Site F), and that of the dead man plus one other at the cairn of 'bgr (WH Cairn 1).

However, even more extraordinary than this is the fact that the texts on the cairn *not* related to the burial are by members of 17 different 'ls.¹⁶ This extraordinary concentration of members of different 'ls in one spot is, to the best of my knowledge, unique. Compare, for instance, the WH collection from the Ruweished area where, in approximately 4000 inscriptions, membership is claimed of only 29 different 'ls, of which 22 are mentioned only once.

The reasons for this concentration can only be guessed at. Apart from the cairn there is nothing remarkable about that particular place, at least to the non-bedouin eye. It is possible, of course, that some of the texts pre-date the cairn and were simply used as building blocks in it, but this in itself is not a sufficient explanation. If the cairn had become a place of pilgrimage for members of different 'ls one would have expected some indication of this in the texts. Instead there is little out of the ordinary in them. Whatever the reasons for this particular concentration, it is a dramatic illustration of the problems which cairns can pose to any

¹⁶This includes 3, other members of which assisted in the burial. Of the total of 20 'ls represented by those involved in the burial as well as those who were not, 11 are mentioned only once and 9 more than once.

attempted analysis of the distribution of the Safaitic 'Is.

One other point should be made about the distribution of 'Is. It is generally assumed when a Safaitic ethnicon can be matched with one found in a Nabataean or Greek text, that both refer to the same, or a related, group. Thus Milik (1980: 45) has no hesitation in identifying the 'l 'mrt of the Safaitic inscriptions both with the 'l 'mrt of a Nabataean-Greek bilingual from Madaba and with the "children of Jambri" from Madaba¹⁷ mentioned in 1 Maccabees 9: 36. Similarly he suggests that the 'l qmyrw of a Nabataean inscription from Ithra in Wadi as-Sirhan,¹⁸ is the same as the 'l qmr of the Safaitic texts. But, however attractive such identifications, they are as yet unprovable and it is important that they are treated as hypotheses and not facts. It is very probable that some, at least, of the Safaitic 'Is had both nomadic and settled sections. But it is a long step from this to identifying the 'mrt of Madaba with those of Şafawi and Burqu'. 'mrt is, after all, a common personal name in Safaitic, Nabataean and Palmyrene, and is even found in north Minaean. It would thus not be surprising if it designated two unrelated groups of people. The same might be said of Grushevoi's attempts (1985) to link the 'l 'byšt/ Οβαιοσηνοι of a Nabataean-Greek bilingual at Si' (CIS ii 164/Waddington 2366) with the Safaitic 'l 'bšt, were it not for one Safaitic inscription, alas unknown to him. This is CSNS 424, from a site south of the main road, between Şafawi and Ruweished, which reads l 's bn 'm bn 's d'l 'bšt w mrd 'l 'l rm f h b 'lsmn 'lh s' 'slm, "By 's son of 'm son of 's of the 'l of 'bšt: and he rebelled against the Romans, and so, O Ba'alšamīn the god of Ši' [grant] security".¹⁹ Given the close association of the 'byšt with the temple of Ba'alšamīn at Si', as shown by the Nabataean and Greek texts discussed by Grushevoi, it seems fairly safe to associate the author of this text with them. On the other hand, the author of WH 1725a, from Wadi Miqaṭ, not very far away from the place where Clark found his text, also describes himself as d'l 'bšt but tells, along with many others at this cairn, of the goats giving birth, and mourns for his son in characteristic Safaitic phraseology. In the case of 'bšt/byšt, therefore, it seems probable that one section were nomadic and another sedentary, settled in Si' or a nearby village. However, there seems no justification for Grushevoi's conclusion that, because the latter are described as a δημος, the entire tribe was settled.

I regret that this survey has had to concentrate so much on what we do *not* know about the distribution of Safaitic inscriptions in northern Jordan, and on the limitations on our knowledge inherent in the material itself. However, I hope that some misconceptions may have been cleared away and that, if the example of the Corpus of the

Inscriptions of Jordan Project is followed in the systematic surveying of limited areas and the detailed recording of the location and context of finds, it may be possible to present at a future conference in this series a more complete picture of the distribution of the Safaitic texts.

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¹⁷He prefers a variant reading "Amrci".

¹⁸Apud Winnett and Reed 1970: 160, no. 130.

¹⁹The stone is in the Amman Museum, no. 14203. Clark does not read the second name which is,

however, visible on the stone. My examination of the original suggests that, *contra* Clark, the letter before *mrd* is *w* not *f*. For the evidence that Safaitic *s* represented /š/ see Macdonald 1986: 110, 117-118, 123-124, and n. 123. The spelling *s*" parallels of course the Nabataean *s*" in Littmann 1914: no. 103.

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| C | <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum Pars V</i> , Paris 1950-51. |
| CIS ii | <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum Pars II</i> , Paris, 1889-. |
| CSNS | Inscriptions in Clark 1979. |
| HCH | Inscriptions in Harding 1953. |
| LP | Inscriptions in E. Littmann: <i>Safaitic Inscriptions</i> . Division IV, Section C of <i>Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-1905 and 1909</i> . Leiden: Brill, 1943. |
| Waddington | Greek inscriptions in W.H. Waddington: <i>Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie recueillies et expliquées</i> . Paris, 1870. |
| WH | Inscriptions in Winnett and Harding 1978. |