

**A NABATAEAN GRAFFITO  
A SHERD FROM THE SWISS-LIECHTENSTEIN EXCAVATION  
AT AZ-ZANṬŪR, PETRA (1994)**

by

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**Archaeological Remarks**

A team of archaeologists from the Archaeological Institute of Basel University, Switzerland, has been working, since 1988, under the direction of R.A. Stucky on two terraces on the slope of az-Zanṭūr in Petra. This year we would like to present a sherd with a Nabataean graffito which is, of all the small finds, of particular interest.

The fragment was uncovered outside the wall running north-south in square 116/L,<sup>1</sup> just under the modern surface level, during cleaning work. No other pieces of the same vessel were found despite careful further excavation. The sherd is not from a closed find-complex. Other finds and the pottery from the area of the structures in squares 115/L and 116/K-L are, without exception, dated to the first century AD. This suggests that the sherd with the Nabataean inscription may well also belong to this period. It has, however, to be re-emphasized that the sherd belongs neither to a datable context, nor to a recognizable building complex.

**Description**

The wall of the fragment is 6-7 mm thick; the colour is very pale brown (Munsell 10YR 7/3), the colour of the core tends to pink (Munsell 5YR 7/3). No slip appears to have been used. The clay is fine, the ware is solid and well fired. The graffito was in-

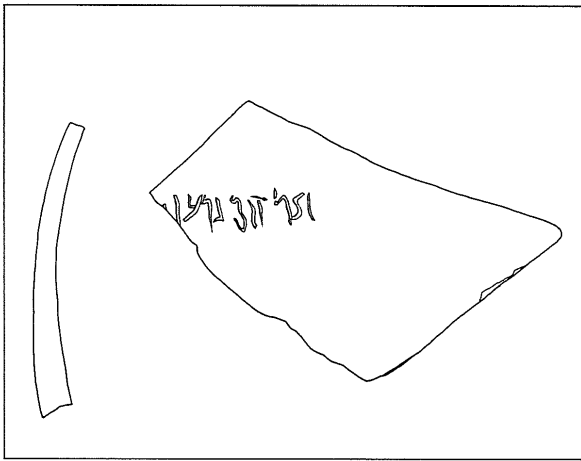
cised in the clay before firing but after drying – when the clay was already leather hard. The sherd (for orientation see Fig.1) is slightly thicker at the lower edge so we assume that the inscription was incised on the shoulder of the vessel and that just below the inscription the shoulder-body join would have begun, as indicated by the slight increase in thickness. It is unfortunately impossible to say what kind of vessel we have here; neither its exact size nor its form are determinable. The shoulder area has an inner diameter of somewhat more than 30 cm, which implies that it was rather large. Before any discussion as to the function of the vessel is possible a few points have to be made.

That the vessel was not produced in Petra or Southern Jordan can be deduced from the colour and fabric of the clay.<sup>2</sup> The vessel was transported to Petra with its inscription already in place from a manufacturer outside the 'ceramic province' of Southern Jordan. It, therefore, seems reasonable to suggest that the vessel served as the container of a product coveted in Petra, in other words, that it was an amphora. However its wall is unusually thin when one considers its large size – especially, if it served as a transport vessel.

The origin of the vessel can only be guessed at – the inscription itself (see below) gives no indication as to where the

1. R.A. Stucky *et al.*, 'Swiss-Liechtenstein Excavations at az-Zanṭūr in Petra 1994. The Sixth Campaign', *ADAJ* 39 (1995): Fig.1.
2. A clay analysis made by ED-XRF (Tracor/Spectrace 5000) supports this observation. According to W.B. Stern from the 'Mineralogisch-

Petrographisches Institut' of Basel University the significant proportion of the elements aluminium, iron, magnesium, calcium, natrium and calium are very different to those found in Nabataean pottery but correspond better to those found in ESA.



1. Sherd from az-Zanṭūr with a Nabataean graffito.

vessel was made. About its content equally little is known. One would expect wine but oil, fish sauce (*garum*) and dried fruits have also been proved to have been imported by the Nabataeans.

The clay analysis and the fact that the route between Petra and Palestine was a well trodden one suggest the possibility that the sherd with the inscription comes from a vessel which was manufactured in the Syro-Palestinian area.

### The Graffito

The reading of the graffito (Fig. 2 a-b) is not without difficulties. On the one hand the scribe seems to have incised the letters into the clay which contained small particles of chaff and had already dried prior to firing. This obviously may have made it more difficult for him to apply his writing instrument. On the other hand some of the letters are of an unusual shape which is not caused by technical factors. The inscription seems to have consisted of a single line, beginning with *zyd?m br c'///*, “?, the son of ?”; more than this is not left.

The letter *z*, to begin with, can be read

clearly, just like *y*, even though it is written comparatively big and with rather distinct curves. The letter *d* follows closely and is of rather angular shape. It shows a long vertical stroke with a short interruption in the upper part; in the lower part the writing instrument seems to have been driven to the left by a small particle of chaff. The reading of the following letter is not clear at all. Neither *h* nor *t* are satisfying,<sup>3</sup> whereas *h* or *ʔ* seem more likely, as John Healey, Manchester, who was kind enough to consider the problem and whom we thank very much for his correspondence, has suggested. As for *h*, Healey refers to the form found in the contract of Nahal Hever,<sup>4</sup> whereas for *ʔ* to several tomb inscriptions of Hegra (مدائن صالح), especially H 37.<sup>5</sup> The following letter *m* is quite clear, though it has the context form and not the expected final form. The letter *b* turned out rather angular, *r* rather curved, but with a marked vertical stroke at the top. The letter *c* is broad, *l* is not completely preserved. Between the third and fourth letter there is a minimal space, between *m* and *b* a small one. Both of them make sense as word separators – rare in Nabataean –, though there is no space between *br* and the following name. Considering the shortness of the present inscription and the lack of a sufficient number of comparable pieces (inscribed pottery) we prefer to refrain from dating the inscription based upon its palaeography.

Whatever might be suggested as the reading of the first personal name (see above for the fourth letter), it is not attested otherwise and – except for the first element (*zyd* “increase of ...”) – not fully explainable. As for possible *zyd ʔm*, Healey con-

3. Nor even *q*, though one might think of the personal name *zydqwm*, well attested in Nabataean. See Avraham Negev, *Personal Names in the Nabataean Realm*. Jerusalem, 1991: no. 388.

4. J. Starcky, ‘Un contrat nabatéen sur papyrus’, *RB* 61 (1954): 162; John Healey, ‘Nabataean to Ar-

abic: Calligraphy and script development among the pre-Islamic Arabs’, *Manuscripts of the Middle East* 5 (Leiden 1990-1991): 50, col. C.

5. John Healey, *The Nabataean Tomb Inscriptions of Mada'in Salih*. Oxford, 1993.



a



b

2. a-b: Sherd from az-Zanṭūr with a Nabataean graffito.

siders a hypocoristic form of *zyd ʿlhy*, the latter being attested in Nabataean.<sup>6</sup> Concerning other possible readings of this name there would be but vague speculations so that the problem has to be left at that. The name of the father is not complete; there are several possibilities of completing *ʿl///*.<sup>7</sup>

**Interpretation**

What could be said about the meaning of the text on the vessel is as vague, particular-

ly because comparable Nabataean objects seem to be lacking. One plausible suggestion would be that the name inscribed on the vessel indicated either the producer of the content or the potter, whether the text continued after the filiation or not. The speciality of the ware (see above), that is, its origin might justify the latter. It is less probable that the name meant the addressee, particularly as there is no *l*, “to/for” before the name and as it had been written before fir-

6. See Negev (n. 1), no. 383. Healey indicates the hypocoristic form *ʿwdw* and *ʿwdm* (*ibid.*, nos. 851 and 852). He alternatively considers the Sabaic Suffix *-m* (Beeston A.F.L., *Sabaic Grammar*.

Louvain, 1984: 31), indicating the Nabataean personal names *hlzm* and *rgšm* (the reading of which should be re-examined).

7. See Negev (n. 1): 51f.

ing. Another plausible interpretation would be that the content of the vessel was for a dedication to some sanctuary or for the purpose of a cultic feast. In this case, the name could have been incised alone so that the dedicator himself was honoured by the mere presence of his name, or the text could have continued by a verb or a verb and an object, that is 'N.N. dedicated (it)' or 'N.N. dedicated ...'.

Regarding all the problems mentioned

above it is hoped that future research will produce elucidating finds.

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