

New Epigraphical Material from the Harra Region of Jordan

by
Vincent A. Clark.

The desert of northeastern Transjordan — a sea of basalt boulders, extending into Syria to the North and into Saudi Arabia to the South, ceasing abruptly to the East where the gravel flats and mud pans run up against the basalt, while to the West the basalt gradually gives way to the more fertile land of the Jordanian hills.

This basalt region, known as the Harra, is of a most desolate and forbidding aspect, broken only occasionally by dry wadi courses, mud flats and low hills and ridges and inhabited only by scattered families of bedu, a few government employees and oil pipeline workers. Scanty rain provides sparse pasturage from which the flocks eke an existence but permanent water supplies are rare.

It is in this region, an area most hostile to man, that are to be found countless thousands of inscriptions in the South Arabian dialect known as Safaitic, along with a lesser number in Aramaic, Greek and Arabic.

During the course of a recent visit to Jordan the writer was fortunate to be able to visit the Harra briefly on a number of occasions and there to make copies of about 500 previously unrecorded Safaitic inscriptions. These came from a number of widely separated areas: from near Jebel el-Aritein¹, from Murabb es-Suwei'id² and from a number of sites on the eastern edge of the basalt on the Qā' Abū el Husein and the Qā' el-'Arqadiya³. The thirty-three texts found at Jebel el-Aritein are, with the exception of the eleven found by the Princeton University expedition at Umm el-Jamal,⁴ the most westerly group of Safaitic texts from Jordan as yet known.

While pursuing this research the writer was housed in great comfort at the American Centre of Oriental Research in Amman, under the directorship of Dr. James A. Sauer. Thanks must be expressed to Dr. Sauer for his invaluable assistance and advice, to the United States Ambassador to Jordan, Mr. T. Pickering, who conveyed the writer on a rapid survey of the eastern edge

-
1. Map reference: Jordan 1: 50 000, Sheet 3354II, El-Aritein, 034582.
 2. Map reference: As above, Sheet 3454I, Wadi el-'Abd, 547738 and 549736.
 3. Map reference: As above, Sheet 3654III, Qā Abū el-Huṣein, 163598, 118516 and 093519.

4. The inscriptions from Umm el-Jamāl are unusual in that they were found inscribed on building remains at the site of the former Nabataean and Roman city and provide the only known instance of Safaitic texts being found in the context of a settlement. It is quite probable that these texts were inscribed by bedouin who were in the employ of the Roman garrison at this caravan city.

of the Harra on August 22nd⁵, and to the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, especially to Mr. Yaqub Oweis and to Dr. Yusef Alami, who kindly provided a four-wheel drive vehicle and a guide during the writer's first visit to the area on May 3rd — 4th, and finally to Mr. Dick Dorset, who was kind enough to provide his services and that of his motorcycle for two days of epigraphical gleaning at Murabb es-Suweï'id.

The inscriptions collected during this stay in Jordan are to form part of a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Melbourne, Australia and will be published in due course.

The Safaitic inscriptions are to be found engraved on boulders and rock outcrops on natural landmarks and on and around burial cairns, which were erected over the dead in this region⁶. Generally these cairns are located on a slight prominence and were constructed of a large number of basalt boulders of about head size, piled up over the burial to form a large, rectangular shaped cairn. The largest seen by the writer was perhaps seven metres square and three metres high,

Large concentrations of these cairns are to be seen along the eastern border of the Harra, along the top of the low ridges which mark the eastern extent of the

basalt. In view of this fact it has been suggested that these cairns were so located as to serve as «lighthouses» along the basalt coast to guide the caravans moving from North to South along its edges.⁷ While it is most probable that the ancient caravans did deliberately elect to follow the easier route over the gravel plains and mud pans, using the edge of the basalt as a guide, it is most unlikely that they deliberately chose to bury their dead there as a conscious guide to navigation. Rather they would have followed the dictates of expedience, it being easier to inter the dead on the edge of the basalt rather than further into it or on the gravel flats (where the graves could be eroded or otherwise disturbed.) In due course the resulting cairns would naturally have become landmarks.

While it is true that large numbers of texts are to be found along the eastern edge of the basalt it must be kept in mind that large numbers have also been found elsewhere, at Jawa, in the Jebel Druze region of Syria, at the Cairn of Hani', on the Tapline road, and at Murabb es-Suweï'id (by the writer); these last three areas are in the very heart of the Harra. It would seem then that the entire region was once inhabited by the Safaitic bedouin and that the high incidence of inscriptions which has been remarked along the eastern edge of the Harra⁸ may in fact be the result of a

5. During this trip the eastern edge of the Harra was explored from H₄ to the Saudi Arabian border, an area which, until now, had only been examined in the area of the Baghdad Highway at Qasr Burqū and around the Wadi Muqat. The expectation expressed by W.G. Oxtoby (see note 7) that the areas to the South of the Wadi Muqat would yield many thousands of inscriptions has proved correct as, in addition to those copied by the writer at Qā' Abū el Ḥuşein and Qā' el Arqadiya, inscriptions were seen by the

hundreds at every site stopped at during this trip. Undoubtedly there are many more to be found in Saudi Arabia also; naturally enough this could not be verified.

6. See G. Lankester Harding, «The Cairn of Hani'», in *Annual of the Department of Antiquities, Jordan*, II 1953, P. 8f.

7. W.G. Oxtoby, «Some Inscriptions of the Safaitic Bedouin», (*American Oriental Society, New Haven, Connecticut*, 1968), P. 33—34.

8. *Ibid.*

no reason to assume that the script fell into disuse in the second or third centuries A.D. as was once hypothesised. Presumably the region remained inhabited until the Muslim Arab conquest and it is unreasonable to assume that the Safaites should have so degenerated as to have lost the art of writing. The later form of the Safaitic script is, as already noted, the most evolved form of the South Semitic script and no other script or dialect seems to have come into general use in the area until the appearance of Kufic Arabic. It is possible, and indeed probable, if we accept that Safaitic continued in use until the Muslim conquest, that the two scripts co-existed for a time until the earlier one fell into eventual disuse. Obviously the bedouin did not find the Arabic script to be a suitable medium for carving on stone as the incidence of Arabic inscriptions is rare. Today most of the regions's bedouin are illiterate.

If indeed the Safaitic script was employed until the beginning of the Muslim era this would account in part for the large numbers of inscriptions which are to be found. Spread over a period of some six centuries it can be assumed that the population of the area need not have been unusually large to produce such a quantity of texts. If, however, we accept a time span of only three or four centuries we must assume that the Safaites were rather prolific authors. Even assuming a time span of six centuries their output is surprising, despite the graffiti nature of most of the inscriptions.

Finally the composition of the texts. Most are no more than the author's name, together with his genealogy for one or two

generations, although six or seven generations are by no means unusual. Others also provide the name of the writer's tribe, clan or family¹³ or provide some details of his activities at the time such as the grazing of flocks or his comings and goings in the desert, while a large number record the author's grief at the death of a relative or friend. Some are clearly of religious significance, seeking help, protection, happiness, plunder and so on from the gods. These deities include Allat and Lat, Ruḏā and Ruḏay, typical gods of the South Arabian pantheon. Others such as Ba'alsamīn and Dhushara were probably borrowed from the Nābatāeans or the Palmyrenes while the provenience of the deity named Yitha', a god often invoked, is a matter for some speculation, with some hopefully identifying him with the Christian Jesus¹⁴. If this is so then the name has been borrowed without any of the trappings of Christianity as there is absolutely no evidence that would suggest that these bedouin were Christian or even influenced by their beliefs. Lastly, as noted, a few texts refer to historical events.

Considered individually these inscriptions appear to offer a meagre and unrewarding field for study but considered as a whole and placed in an historical, linguistic and archaeological context they provide valuable information about those people who once lived, traded and fought in this desolate land. Much more is still to be learnt about them and it is to be hoped that future research will be a well considered attempt to study not merely the inscriptions but the entire context in which they are found.

Vincent A. Clark

13. See G. Lankester Harding, «The Safaitic Tribes», in *Al-Abhath* XXII, Nos. 3&4, Dec. 1969.

14. F.V. Winnett, *op. cit.*, P. 16. discussion on SJJ 63.

More Safaitic Texts from Jordan

M.C.A. Macdonald

and

G. Lankester Harding

Of the present group of texts the first twenty-two are said to have been collected in the region of Qasr Burqa' north of the Baghdad road near H 4, and are now in the Amman Museum. Nos. 23 and 24 are in the Irbid Museum and are said to have come from the Mafraq area. We are greatly indebted to the outgoing Director General of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, Mr. Y. Oweis, and to his successor Dr. A. Hadidi, for permission to publish them, and to Mr. Yusef al-Alami and other members of the Department for their never-failing help and interest in all that concerns the past of Jordan.

A confirmation of the provenance of the first twenty-two texts is provided by the fact that, of the nine stones brought in, two had been seen and copied by Winnett and Harding in that area in 1959–60, and form nos. 1273–1275 and 3912 of the forthcoming publication of nearly 4000 texts from that area. A closer and more leisurely examination of the remarkable drawing of no. 3912 revealed details which had been missed in the field, so, in this respect, it is fortunate that it was one of the stones brought in. This shows yet again how a comparatively brief examination — even by one who is well accustomed to copying from the original rather than dealing only with photographs or drawings — can result in the missing of important details and it emphasizes the necessity for a reliable photograph. However, on such expeditions time is usually limited, and a copy or photograph must be taken while

one has the opportunity, even if the light is far from satisfactory: a return to the same spot usually being out of the question. Neither stone is published here as they form an integral part of the full publication, now in the press.

A unique feature of the group is the presence of two minute Nabataean texts, one very short and one long, on the stone bearing nos. 6–14. The short text appears between nos. 6 and 12, while the long is between nos 6 and 11. Mr. J.T. Milik is now preparing the texts for publication. Their size and position, squeezed in as they are among the Safaitic texts, suggests that they were inscribed after the texts around them. Their presence is therefore of great importance in providing one of the very few peices of external evidence we have for the dating of Safaitic inscriptions, since on palaeographical grounds a date can be assigned to the Nabataean texts thus giving us a *terminus ad quem*, at least for the Safatic texts 6, 11 and 12.

The engraving of nineteen out of the twenty-four texts is done by the scratching technique, using a very fine and obviously tough, pointed tool of some kind. The writing of texts 9, 10, 12 and 13 is very small indeed, yet the letters are on the whole very well formed. However, the smallest and finest of all are the Nabataean texts which are practically invisible in some places. Nos. 15–21 are deeply cut, suggesting rubbing by a point in contrast to the light scratching of the rest. The whole