

A Nabataean Inscription from Beida

by

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At Beida, near Petra, Nabataean graffiti are scratched on the whitish cliffs of Wadi el-Amṭi (Fig. 1), north of Sîq el Bared, well known for its fragmentary fresco. The site was sketched and described by Brünnow¹ who recognised in the flat center of the Wadi, traces of a large caravanserai. In the eastern ridge, at the entrance of a cave, (probably a triclinium) measuring 5,95 by 6,90m and whose doorway is decorated by two engaged pilasters (Fig. 2), are engraved several Nabataean inscriptions. Since one of them is of special interest and has been erroneously deciphered by previous explorers,² it deserves to be reconsidered. The text, consisting of two lines, is about 73 cm long and the letters average 8–10 cm in height (Fig. 3–4). Because of the irregular surface of the sandstone, the inscription was hard to photograph and read.

Text:

dkrwn ṭb [w] ṣl [m] lḡnmw rb

mrzh' ww'lw brh

Translation:

In pious remembrance and peace to Ġanamū, the Symposiarch and his son Wa'ilu.

Interpretation:

L.1: Though partly worn, the beginning of the inscription can be restored from similar Nabataean inscriptions. The names Ġanamū and Wa'ilu (1.2) are known from the Petra and Hegra graffiti and can be compared to modern Arabic Ġānem and Wā'el.³

L.2: *rb marzeḥa* corresponds to the Greek *symposiarchos*, and the *marzeḥa* was a religious association (*Thiasos* in Greek) generally led by a priest as it was common at Palmyra. A *thiasos* of Obodas the god, probably Obodas I (around 90 B.C.) is commemorated by an inscription near the Deir⁴, which could be the sanctuary of this deified Nabataean king. At Avdat⁵, in the Negev, a *marzeḥa* of Dhu-Shara, the god of Gaia (modern Wadi Musa) is mentioned.

According to Strabo, 13 members participated to the symposia of Petra, a tradition which recalls Christ and his 12 disciples celebrating the Last Supper.⁷ It is indeed an evidence of cultural and religious contacts between the Nabataeans and the inhabitants of the area at that period.

1. *Die Provincia Arabia*, I, N° 843. G. Dalman, (*Petra und seine Felsheiligtümer*, 1908 p. 346), refers to it as « Wadi Lanti ».

2. *CIS*, II, 1, N° 476.

3. See J. Cantineau, *Le Nabatéen*, II Paris (132) p. 88, 133.

4. G. Dalman, *Neue Petra—Forschungen* (1912) p. 92, n° 73.

5. A. Negev, *IEJ*, 13 (1963) p. 13–117.

6. *Geography*, XVI, 4, 26.

7. See F. Zayadine, in S. Horn *Festschrift* (Forthcoming), where the date of the graffiti is not indicated.

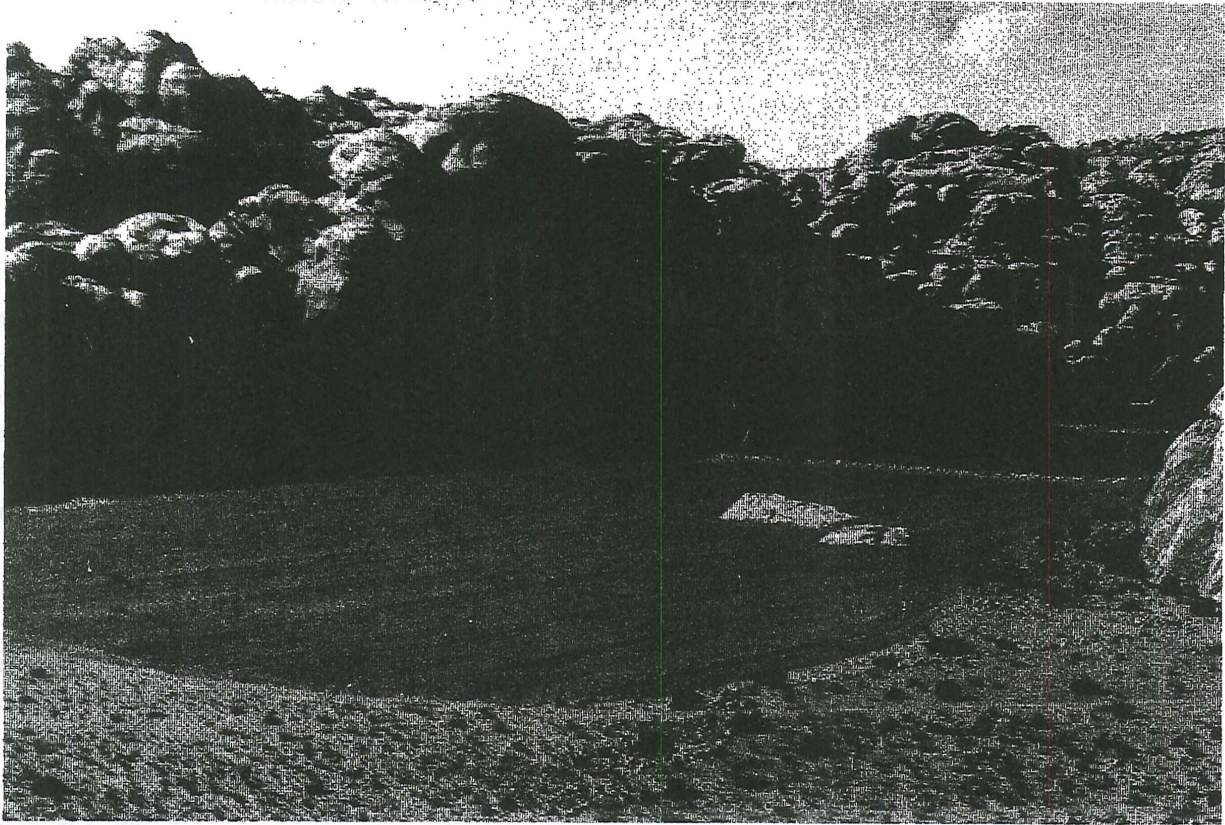


Fig. 1. — General view of Wadi el Amti, (looking N).



Fig. 2. — Entrance to the cave.

רטרון י א לא ארד
שנת המסר עת

Fig. 3. — Facsimile of the inscription.



Fig. 4.— Nabataen inscription of Wadi el Amti.

Paleography and dating:

Paleographic study alone can help to determine the dating of the inscription:

In line 2, the three bars *aleph* is of the archaic type and contrasts with the closed *aleph* of later period. The same remark can be applied to the open *h*, the latest example of which dates to 9/10 A.D.⁸, and to the *h* with gabled top. But the rounded *mem* belongs to a later script⁹. These cha-

racteristics suggest a date not later than the first half of the first century A.D., and probably around the first quarter of the same century.

This short inscription indicates the use of the triclinia of Petra as centers of religious symposia and is a good illustration of the Strabo's historical account.

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8. J. Starcky, *Hommage à Dupont-Sommer*, Paris (1971) p. 153.

9. J. Starcky, *RB* 73 (1966) p. 237; *Dict. de la Bible*, Sup. VII, Fig. 696.