

**THE NABATAEAN KING-LIST REVISED:  
FURTHER OBSERVATIONS ON THE SECOND NABATAEAN  
INSCRIPTION FROM TELL ESH-SHUQAFIYA,  
EGYPT**

by

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### Introduction

With the recent publication of a new early Nabataean inscription from Tell esh-Shuqafiya, Egypt, scholars have a welcome and important source of information for the knowledge of the Nabataeans in Egypt, as well as of the classical world in a wider sense (Jones *et al.* 1988). This inscription provides for the first time in Nabataean texts, three very important and synchronized dates, relevant here in particular to the succession of the Nabataean kings. It is the purpose of this paper to study the implications of these dates found in this inscription and to discuss their importance for the understanding of the chronology of the Nabataean kings.

With the appearance of the *editio princeps* of the new Nabataean inscription from Tell esh-Shuqafiya, Egypt, several communications circulated between one of the authors and the late Father Jean Starcky regarding the importance of this text. It was the opinion of Starcky that the reading of the regnal date of Cleopatra in line 4 of the *editio princeps* should be modified. At that time the present authors were preparing a second article in which they wished to discuss the date of Malichus I and the Nabataean king-list.<sup>1</sup> To date, Starcky has been the only scholar to propose a different reading of the date of Cleopatra as read in the *editio princeps*. His expressed permission to publish this observation in the present paper was granted just days before his death.<sup>2</sup> What follows then, is a discussion of the date of

Cleopatra in Shuqafiya 2 and the extended implications of this corrected reading for the Nabataean king-list, and especially the controversial issue of the existence of Obodas II in the mid-first century B.C.

### I. A Correction of the Regnal Date of Cleopatra and the Accession of Malichus I

The previously noted argument of Jean Starcky has persuaded the present authors that the reading of one small but crucial numeral in Shuqafiya 2 has been misread in the *editio princeps* (Figs. 1a, b). This is the regnal date of Cleopatra appearing in line 4 of the inscription which was originally read as "year 14" but now is surely to be read as "year 18." Originally, the Aramaic numerals were read as 10 (as a rather typical arc) + 4 (composed of four ligatured units). The numerals should now be read as 10 + 5 + 3, the sum 18. Fig. 2 presents several examples of Nabataean numbers taken from inscriptions and coinage which contain examples of the Nabataean numeral 5, both ligatured and isolated. Note should be taken of several points. The numeral 5 always retains a tilt or slant oriented somewhat to the right, in contrast to the units which usually slant to the left, particularly if there are three units or less. Further, the stem of the numeral 5 is usually longer or of greater height than the units and often contains a slight bend located mid-stem. When ligatured, there is a characteristic acute angle at the base as it connects with the preceding letter to the

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1. The initial date for Malichus I placed at 63/62 B.C. in the *editio princeps* appeared uncomfortably close and possibly conflicting with the evidence of Josephus. According to *Antiquities* XIV: 81, Aretas III was still king in 62 B.C.

during the abortive expedition of Scaurus against Petra.

2. In particular, the letters of December 12, 1987 and January 7, 1988, both Jean Starcky to Richard Jones.

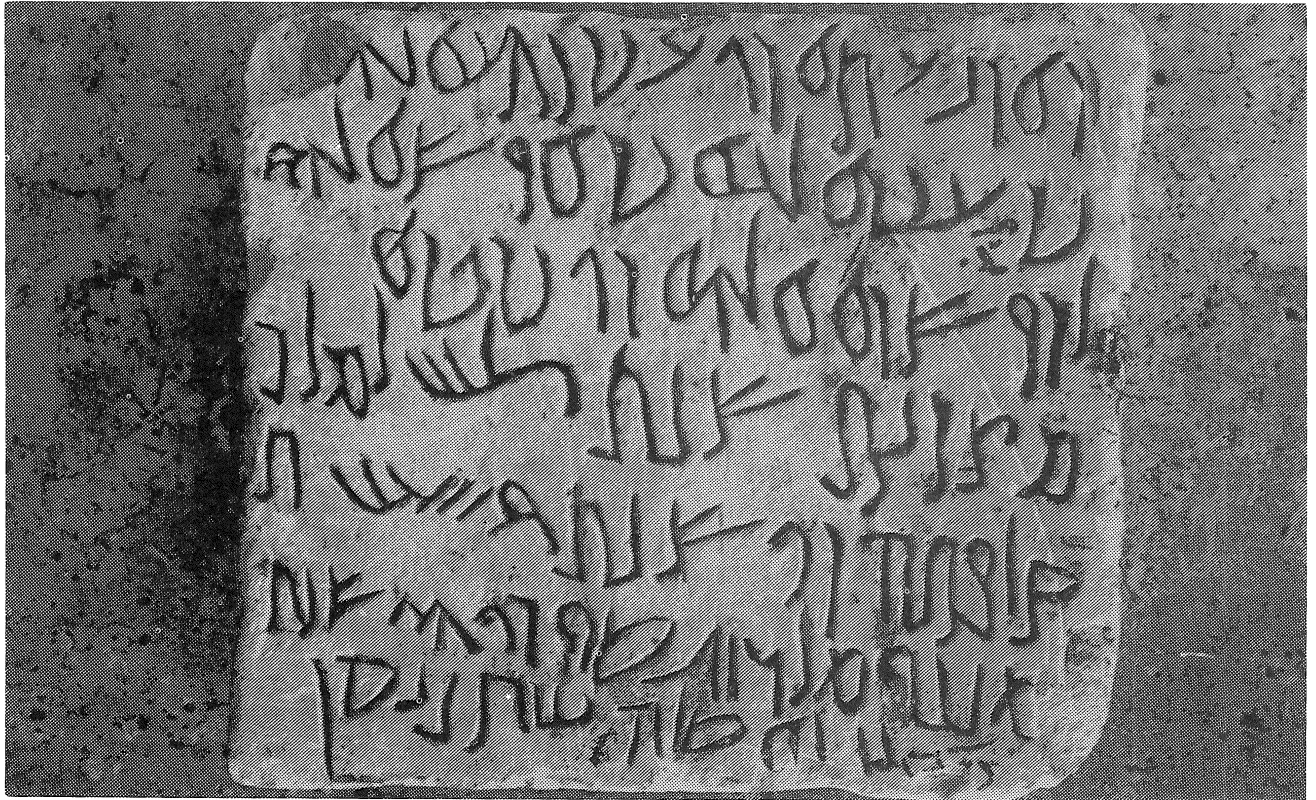


Fig. 1a. The Zagazig Second Nabataean Inscription from Tell esh-Shuqafiya (Photo: Richard N. Jones).

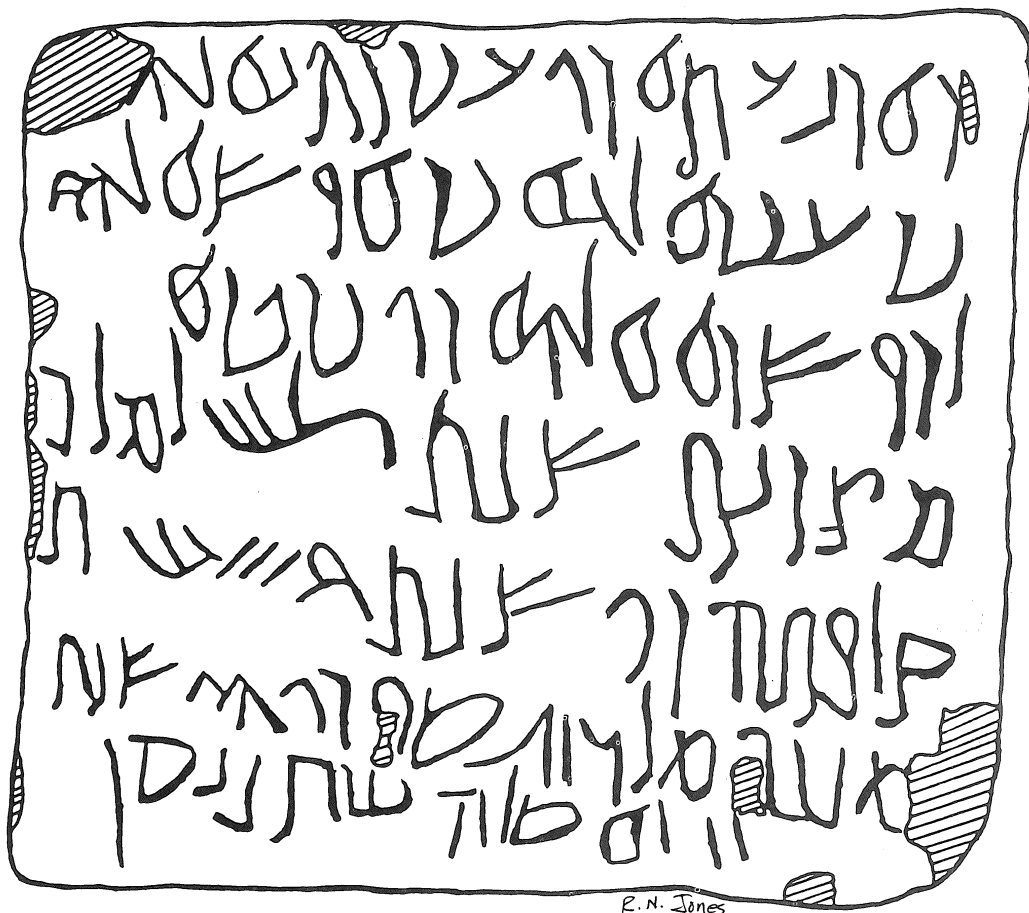


Fig. 1b. Facsimile of Tell esh-Shuqafiya Nabataean Inscription (after R.N. Jones).

# NABATAEAN NUMERALS









EXAMPLE	SCRIPT	SUM
Shuqafiya II		18
C.I.S. 203		18
C.I.S. 222		17
C.I.S. 204		25
Coin of Rabb <sup>o</sup> el II		17
Coin of Haritat IV		16
Coin of Manku II		6
Coin of Manku II		9

Fig. 2. Chart of Nabataean numerals. The chart illustrates various examples of the Nabataean Aramaic numeral 5, both ligatured and isolated, and implies no chronological continuity. All examples are taken and drawn from Milik and Seyrig (1958).

right, or as the ligature sweeps around and below from the right to the left and connecting with any following numerals to the left. A further point against the original reading of four ligatured units is that the numeral 4 is often represented by a cross-shaped sign and that the units are seldom ligatured in groups composed of more than three individuals. Clearly, Starcky was correct in reading the numerals as the sum 18.

The correlation of this corrected numeral for the context of the inscription is as follows. Accepting the year 51 B.C. as the initial year of Cleopatra VII, her year 18, according to the corrected reading, would be 35/34 B.C. (Skeat 1937: 20-21). Since the month Nisan is mentioned in the inscription, it follows that the inscription is dated to April 34 B.C. The inscription further equates this date with year 26 of Malichus, and therefore Malichus (clearly Malichus I) ascended the Nabataean throne in 59/58 B.C. and not in the year 63/62 as proposed originally. It is now possible to translate the inscription as follows:

This is the (quadrangular) shrine which Wabh'alahi son of 'Abd'alga' son of 'Awš'alahi made to (the honor of) Dushares the god who is in Daphne (as it is known) in the Egyptian language. (Dated) year 18 of queen Cleopatra, which is year 26 of Malichus king of the Nabataeans, which are year 2 of 'tlh. (Dedicated) in the month of Nisan.

This correction is important enough for a proper reading of this very early Nabataean Aramaic text. However, the resulting implications of this corrected date are equally important for the history and succession of Nabataean kings.

## II. A New Appraisal of the Nabataean King-list

Although seemingly a minor correc-

tion, this newly proposed date for the ascension of Malichus I may serve to improve our understanding of the chronology of the Nabataean kings of the middle of the first century B.C. It is known that almost all coins issued by Malichus I were minted during his 27th and 28th years, as the coins themselves demonstrate (Meshorer 1975: 21). Meshorer, accepting the accession of Malichus at 60 B.C., has suggested that this active period of coin production (corresponding in Meshorer's chronology to years 34/33 and 33/32) should be associated with the king's preparations for the war with Herod (Meshorer 1975: 21).<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt, however, that that conflict, involving the battles of Diospolis and Canatha, took place in the year of Actium, that is, 31 B.C. (Bowersock 1983: 42; Negev 1977: 543). Meshorer argues that the Nabataean army was sent into the field, with soldiers requiring pay, as early as 34 B.C. With the year 59/58 as his initial regnal year, years 27 and 28 of Malichus I would correspond to 33/32 and 32/31 B.C., thus agreeing more closely with the dates of this military conflict.

The firm establishment of the date of the accession of Malichus I raises an even more significant issue. The final regnal year of the predecessor of Malichus I, king Aretas III Philhellene, is not firmly established (Negev 1977: 541). The last historical information pertaining to that king is provided by Josephus in *Antiquities* XIV: 80-81 and *War* I: 159. This concerns the abortive expedition of Scaurus against Petra in 62 B.C. Upon the return of Pompey to Rome in early 62 B.C., the governorship of Syria was left in the hands of one of his legates, M. Aemilius Scaurus who almost immediately undertook an expedition against the Nabataeans (Bowersock 1983: 32-33). Although the reasons for this undertaking are not clear, personal gain appears to have been the main motive (see Sartre 1979: 43-45). Thus, when negotiations were opened between Aretas III

3. The earliest historical attestation of king Malichus I (in Nabataean *mnkw*) is found in *De Bello Alexandrino* (1.1) where there is mention

of the Nabataean cavalry coming to the aid of Caesar at Alexandria in 47 B.C.

and his friend Antipater (the advisor to Scaurus), Scaurus, being short of supplies, was easily bought off by the modest sum of 200 talents of silver (Josephus, *Antiquities* XIV: 81), and withdrew from Arabia. The significance of this account lies in the fact that the date of that event is well-established and the name of Aretas III is explicitly mentioned. Furthermore, as a result of that expedition, Aemilius Scaurus, when back in Rome, commemorated the event on the occasion of his *aedilate* by issuing coins bearing the image of the Nabataean king including the appropriate inscription, *REX ARETAS*. This coinage issued in 58 B.C., some five years after the expedition of Scaurus, is obviously related to the desire of Scaurus for political aggrandizement, rather normal for an *aedile* (for a discussion of this point, see Bowersock 1983: 34-35).

This fact reopens the long-standing discussions concerning the chronology of the Nabataean kings of the mid-first century B.C. Hitherto, scholars were at a loss, either by trying to extend the reigns of Aretas III and Malichus I so that they would overlap, or by leaving the obvious chronological gap between these two reigns with the problem being accentuated by the presence of question marks in the chronological scheme. For example, J. Starcky sees the reign of Aretas continuing as late as 62 B.C. and suggests the accession of Malichus to the throne in 56 B.C. at the latest (Starcky 1966: 909). A. Negev mentions the possible existence of a king named Obodas between Aretas III and Malichus I (Negev 1969: 5; 1982: 121), but elsewhere, he obviously rejects this notion and suggests that the end of the reign of Aretas III and the beginning of the reign of Malichus I is to be placed at the year 60 B.C. (Negev 1977: 542). G. Bowersock (1971: 223) cautiously remarks that Malichus I was already king by 56, however, he does not provide us with the final year of Aretas III in his chronological survey of the Nabataean kings. On the

other hand, several scholars have suggested that another obscure king, named Obodas, the second king of that name in the Nabataean king-list, must have existed between Aretas III and Malichus I.<sup>4</sup> Thus, this obscure Obodas would have reigned for a very short period, approximately from 62 B.C. to 60 B.C. (Hill 1965: xii; Cantineau 1930: 8; Meshorer 1975: 16-17; Khairy 1985: 77 and Wenning 1987: 13).

It seems that in light of the evidence of Shuqafiya 2, the proposal which places the beginning of Malichus I at year 62 B.C. (i.e. Hammond 1973: 19), can now be rejected outright. It should also be noted that Dussaud (1955: 54) modified his early observations and recognized the existence of a king Obodas [II] between the reigns of Aretas III and Malichus I, whose reign he dated to the years 62-50 B.C.

With the initial date of Malichus I now set firmly at 59/58 B.C., the easiest solution would be to extend the reign of Aretas III to as late as 60/59 B.C. Indeed, between 61 and 58 B.C., there is no information in any literary source about the state of affairs within the Nabataean kingdom (Bowersock 1983: 34). Yet, the numismatic evidence concerning the king Obodas II, placed between Aretas III and Malichus I, deems it necessary to re-examine the entire problem. This evidence consists of four silver coins which imitate Tyrian half-shekels, bearing the legend "Obodas king of Nabatene, year one/two/three" (Meshorer 1975: 87-88). Upon close examination, Meshorer convincingly concludes that these four coins could not date from the reign of the Obodas who reigned *after* Malichus I during the years 30-9/8 B.C. Meshorer concludes this from the following evidence. First, the portraiture is clearly distinguishable from that found on coins of the late first century B.C. king of the same name. There is a lack of the portrayal of a consort. And lastly, the Nabataean letters of the legend contain archaic features such as their square and angular nature (Meshorer 1975: 19).

4. Most scholars, however, cautiously recognize the existence of only two kings by the name of

Obodas: Obodas I (96-85 B.C.) and Obodas II (30-9/8 B.C.).

It is certainly impossible to associate these coins with the reign of the Nabataean ruler of the same name who reigned about 96-85 B.C.<sup>5</sup> and who is known from the narrative of Josephus as being victorious in battles against Alexander Jannaeus and the Seleucid Antiochus XII (*Antiquities* V: 101-02, and XIII: 375, 387-91).<sup>6</sup> This firm although inconclusive numismatic evidence further supports the scholarly opinion which favours the possibility of the existence of a king named Obodas, thus Obodas II, which is to be placed between Aretas III and Malichus I. In the words of Bowersock:

The portrait of an aged monarch identified as Obodas is noticeably different from the portrait of the only other king of that name who is known to have minted coins. Accordingly, it may be that an otherwise unattested Nabataean king, whom certain scholars have pleased to call Obodas II, should be located between 62 and 56, or some part of that interval (Bowersock 1983: 34).

The importance of the second Nabataean inscription from Tell esh-Shuqafiya lies in the fact it provides strong support for the brief reign of a forgotten Nabataean king — Obodas II. If Obodas II ruled for only three years, as is suggested by the analysis of the coinage by Meshorer, his rule would fit perfectly within the present problematic framework between the accession of Malichus I, herein now dated to 59/58 B.C., and the last known year of the reign of Aretas III, that is 62 B.C. To buttress the scant evidence for the existence of Obodas II, Meshorer further called upon the Aşlah inscription from Petra (Meshorer 1975: 16; Dalman 1912: 99 no. 90; Cantineau 1932, vol. 2: 2-3, #2). This

inscription mentions “Obodas king of the Nabataea, son of Aretas king of the Nabataea ...year 1.” However, the same chronological and family relationship can be seen in the case of Obodas I (96-85 B.C.). That king succeeded a Nabataean ruler known as Aretas (the second of that name in the king-list) dated to approximately 120/10 to 96 B.C., known as “king of the Arabs” (Josephus, *Antiq.* XIII: 360) and also *REX HEROTIMUS* (Justin, *History* XXXIX 5.5-6). However, few scholars have followed Meshorer in dating the Aşlah inscription to the reign of this later and poorly documented Nabataean king Obodas II, preferring to date the text to the reign of Obodas I, year 96/95 B.C. (Starcky 1966: 906, 927; Bowersock 1983: 23, n. 43, and 34, n. 27; Negev 1977: 536). Most recently, Frank Cross has stated that the Aşlah inscription cannot be dated later than the 90’s of the first century B.C. He notes that the tendency for standard letter height has not taken place, and that certain letter forms of Aşlah are typologically less developed than the later scripts of both Shuqafiya 1 and the Rabb’el inscriptions, most notably ‘*alep*, ‘*teṭ* (with its high arm and narrow form), the still small *lamed*, the still archaic *mem*, and *qop*.<sup>7</sup> Further, the Aşlah inscription contains no transitional variations in letters, with some letters retaining more archaic features with others anticipating still later forms (a prominent feature of Shuqafiya 2). Accordingly, the Aretas mentioned in the Aşlah inscription must be Aretas II (*HEROTIMUS*).

Now, however, the evidence of Shuqafiya 2 and the above new reading of the initial year of Malichus I, supports the earlier somewhat hypothetical, or at best poorly documented, existence of king

5. Nabataean coins are known from the reigns of Aretas II, Obodas I, Rabb’el I and Aretas III, but closely resemble Hellenistic examples with legends in Greek (Meshorer 1975: 11, 12, 85-87). The first Nabataean coins bearing Nabataean legends are the four coins of the Obodas who ruled between Aretas III and Malichus I, as discussed in the present paper.

6. The latter victory has been associated by some with the successor of Obodas I, Rabb’el I (Hammond 1973: 17). However, recent studies have not followed this opinion (Bowersock 1983: 24; Negev 1977: 537; Starcky 1966: 906).

7. Letter of Frank Moore Cross to Richard N. Jones, April 22, 1989.

Obodas II, by creating the necessary gap between the reigns of Malichus I and Aretas III, making it possible to accommodate a ruler whose reign most probably lasted a short three years. Therefore, we present here a revised version of the Nabataean king-list modified from the earlier lists of Wenning (1987: 13), Bowersock (1971: 222-223) and Starcky (1966: 904-920):<sup>8</sup>

Aretas I	<i>fl. ca.</i> 168 B.C. (2 Macc. 5 and 8)
Rabb'el I	uncertain ( <i>C.I.S.</i> 349)
Aretas II	<i>ca.</i> 120/10-96 B.C. (Josephus, <i>Antiq.</i> XIII: 360)
Obodas I	<i>ca.</i> 96-85 B.C. (Josephus, <i>Antiq.</i> XIII: 375, 387-391)
Aretas III	85-62 B.C. (Josephus, <i>War I</i> : 124)
Obodas II	62/61-59 B.C.
Malichus I	59/58-30 B.C. (Josephus, <i>War I</i> : 274-276)
Obodas III	30-9/8 B.C. (Josephus, <i>Antiq.</i> XVI: 220)
Aretas IV	9/8 B.C.-40 A.D. (Josephus, <i>Antiq.</i> XVI: 294)
Malichus II	40-70 A.D. (Josephus, <i>War III</i> : 68)
Rabb'el II	71-106 A.D. ( <i>C.I.S.</i> 161, 224, 225)

#### APPENDIX

##### More Light on the Recovery of the Second Nabataean Inscription from Tell esh-Shuqafiya

There can be little doubt that the discovery of a second Nabataean inscription allegedly from Tell esh-Shuqafiya, Egypt, provided one of the most important Aramaic inscriptions from Egypt to surface in many years. Not only is it the second oldest Nabataean inscription from Egypt and therefore of importance for a variety

of reasons to historians of the period, it is also of great importance for the study of Aramaic epigraphy, as it captures the script of late Western Aramaic at a period during which it was undergoing a very rapid transition. How, then, did it occur that such a significant inscription could simply be fortuitously noticed in the public domain resting upon a museum shelf?

It has been reported previously that the Zagazig-Nabataean inscription from Tell esh-Shuqafiya was spotted and noted as a new and potentially important Aramaic text in October of 1982 by Richard N. Jones during a brief tour of the *Muthaf Hariat Razna* by the staff of the American Expedition to Tell esh-Shuqafiya (Jones *et al.* 1988). The museum is a small facility located within the historical confines of the old sector of al-Zagazig.<sup>9</sup> No information was gathered initially regarding the source and nature of the inscription from the (then) director of the museum, except for the gift of a small locally made photograph of the inscription from which initial work on the text was made. Therefore, Jones returned to Egypt in August of 1986 to carefully photograph the stone, to conduct a detailed study of the ancient text, to secure written permission to publish the artifact, and to obtain further information regarding its origins. This was done with the assistance of the director of the museum, Madame Luliya 'Abd al-Masih. At this time, brief interviews were also gathered from selected inhabitants of the small hamlet known as 'Ezbit Sukkar, which borders and in some substantial degree actually lies over the northern portion of Tell esh-Shuqafiya.

The following was learned concerning the inscription. The inscription was recovered from Tell esh-Shuqafiya in 1965 or slightly earlier. This is according to Mr. Muhammad 'Aliywa Musallamy of the

8. References are not exhaustive but include only representative citations.

9. The *Muthaf Hariat Razna* (the Museum of Hariat Razna, or less commonly the Museum of Ahmad 'Arabi) is located in the old section of

al-Zagazig, earlier known as the village of Hariat Razna, and earlier still as Hariat al-Sharqiyya, the Pharaonic *Horou Nefer*. It is located within a few kilometres of the ruins of Bubastis and its associated museum known as the *Muthaf Tella-Basta* (Ramzy 1950-53 vol. 2: 89).

Egyptian Department of Antiquities, who claims the credit for recognizing its significance as an ancient text and into whose care the inscription was placed after being unearthed. How the stone was unearthed is not clear. The only potentially useful piece of information that could be gathered from local hamlet residents was that a few large pieces of limestone were uncovered during the excavation of the particular branch of the Nile canal which was dug through the middle of Tell esh-Shuqafiya. The date of the canal excavation could not be remembered accurately by the local people, and most of the vague recollections regarding the nature of these accidentally excavated stones were that they were removed by individuals who were not members of the actual excavation team. Aside from scientific excavation on the tell by the American Expedition to Tell esh-Shuqafiya, the only other substantial excavation into the tell was that made during the construction of the canal, and it seems very likely that the inscription was unearthed then. However, this point has not yet been confirmed. It appears that from 1965 to September 1973, the date of the opening of the museum, the inscription was stored in one of several regional antiquities warehouses until it, and other objects, were taken to the newly constructed museum in that part of old al-Zagazig known as Hariat Razna. It was by the agency of Mr. Musallamy that the inscription reached its final home at the museum at al-Zagazig, where it is officially designated artifact #60 in museum records. Thus, having been associated with no formalised excavation, the inscription remained the unpublished property of this

particular museum at al-Zagazig, and clearly within the public domain, for more than nine years, until noted for its potential importance in October of 1982.

Subsequent letters of Mr. Musallamy to Jones contained additional information regarding the source of the inscription.<sup>10</sup> It is well known that there are several ancient tells and koms throughout Egypt by the name of Shuqafiya. There is the well-known Kom esh-Shuqafa, located within the present "old" city of Alexandria (the site of the ancient Serapeum); there is another tell of similar name, Tell esh-Shuqafiya el-Athar, which lies very near the Tell esh-Shuqafiya of concern here, and several others in addition to these. Mr. Musallamy specifically locates the find-site of Shuqafiya 2 as the Tell esh-Shuqafiya located near and partially "under" the present-day hamlet of *Ezbit Sukkar*. This is apparently the same site as that where Clermont-Ganneau claims to have discovered the first Nabataean inscription from Tell esh-Shuqafiya early this century (Clermont-Ganneau 1919). Tell esh-Shuqafiya is located approximately 3-4 km. from the village of Tell el-Kebir.

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10. Letter of Mr. Muhammad Musallamy to Richard N. Jones, dated April 16, 1988.



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