

THE SELA' SCULPTURE: A NEO-BABYLONIAN ROCK RELIEF IN SOUTHERN JORDAN*

by

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Introduction (A. Goguel)

The village of Sela' is located in the district of at-Ṭafilah, on the King's Highway, some 50 km north of Petra, near Buṣayra. Many archaeological remains in this area show the importance of the site at different periods in its ancient history.

At mid-height of a vertical cliff near the village, a rock relief was recently discovered. This relief (6 m²) shows a standing figure, three divine symbols and a cuneiform inscription. The style is Mesopotamian and it is most probably from the sixth century BC.

So far it had been impossible to get a good record of this relief because of access difficulties. In autumn 1996, A. Goguel, a former architect at IFAPO in Amman, asked permission from the Department of Antiquities to organize a visit to the site with professional rock climbers.

This light expedition focused on three main objectives :

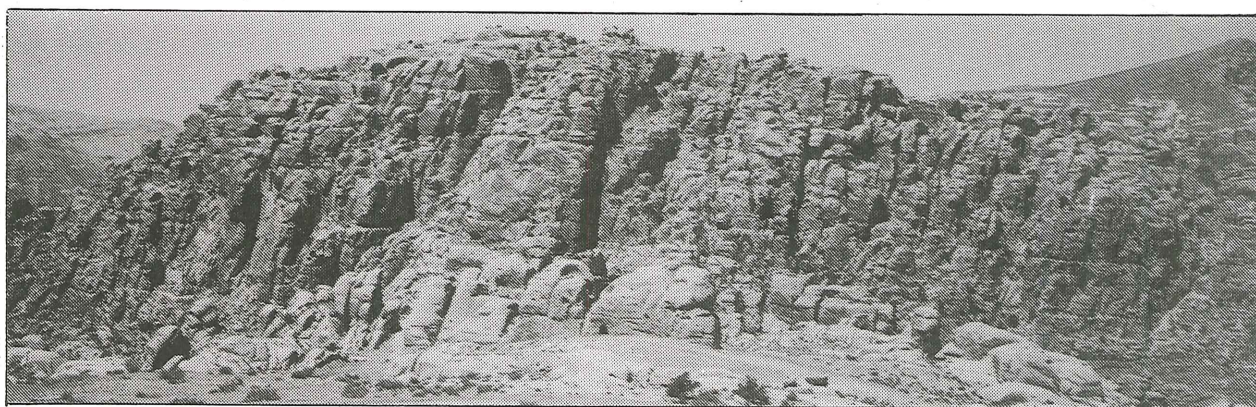
- To find out how the access was obtained and what kind of scaffolding had been used to carve the relief,

- to make a test squeeze of the inscription,
- to evaluate the state of preservation of the relief.

Some of the results are presented here, as well as the documentation - squeeze, photos and drawings, gained during this expedition. These documents were given to S. Dalley for analysis and her first conclusions are presented here.

Location

The rock of Sela' (Fig.1) is located in an exceptional geographical environment, on the western flank of the Edom Plateau, at the edge of the tectonic plate of Arabia dominating the 'Arabah rift valley. It stands at the beginning of the transversal break of a tributary wadi winding through a rocky labyrinth from the plateau down to the 'Arabah valley, some 1200 m below. The rock cliff, made of sandstone (rather white, like the upper Petra rocks, i.e. probably ad-Disa sandstone), culminates at short distance below the smooth limestone plateau. The rock relief is located at mid-height of the steepest 150 m part, surrounded by a sheer drop on



1. General view of the rock at Sela'.

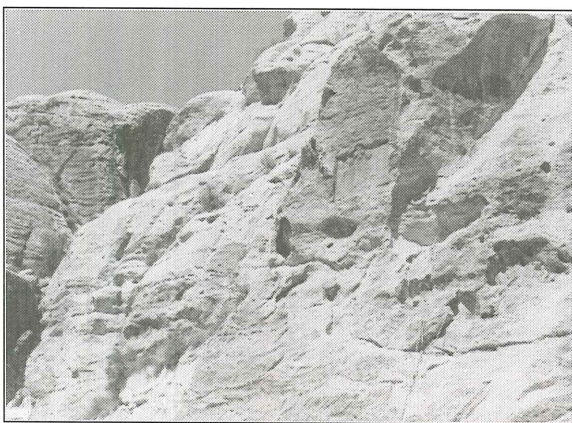
* This rock relief was discovered some years ago by Dr Hamad Qatamine from Mu'ta University.

all sides, oriented towards south-south-east. The rock face is perfectly vertical over 30 m below and 7 m above, where a small platform allows access (Figs. 2 and 3a-c). The relief is engraved in a recess of 10 to 20 cm in depth, 3 m wide by 2 m high and visible from the bottom of the rock at a distance of about 200 m. By an optical effect due to the slope, the relief seems much bigger than it really is. The standing figure emerging in the middle of an inaccessible vertical surface is both mysterious and impressive.

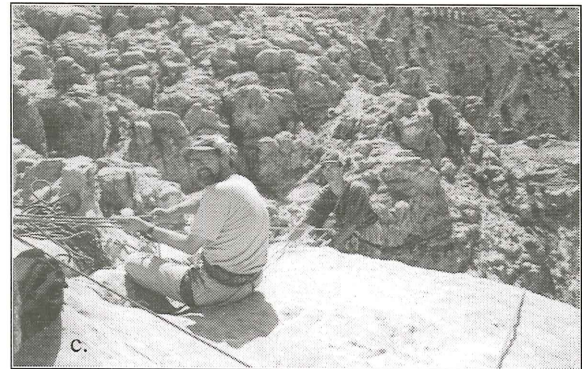
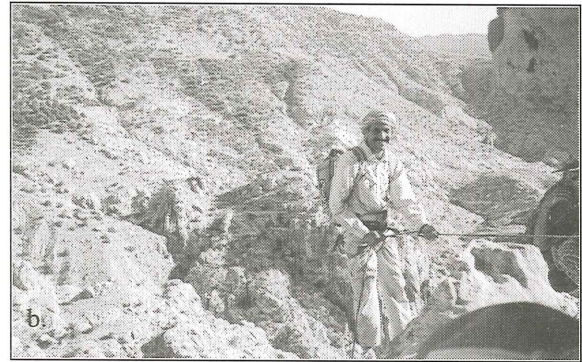
Access and Operation

A small party consisting of three climbers and A. Goguel, trained in rock climbing, reached the relief sculpture in autumn 1996 and studied it for one day, using light technical climbing equipment in order to ensure safety and comfort. The expedition went up to the edge of the plateau and from there, by a series of short walls, rock fractures and unsteady screes, climbed 70 m down to the key platform surrounded by sheer drops. This platform is exactly above the sculpture and provides an ideal working site for setting up mountaineering ropes and securing them solidly tied to rock belays. Two members stayed there for ensuring safety and handing tools to the other two suspended on the ropes, and recording the sculpture.

The cuneiform inscription engraved in the rock was found severely weathered and had mostly disappeared due to wind ero-



2. Location of the rock relief of Sela'.



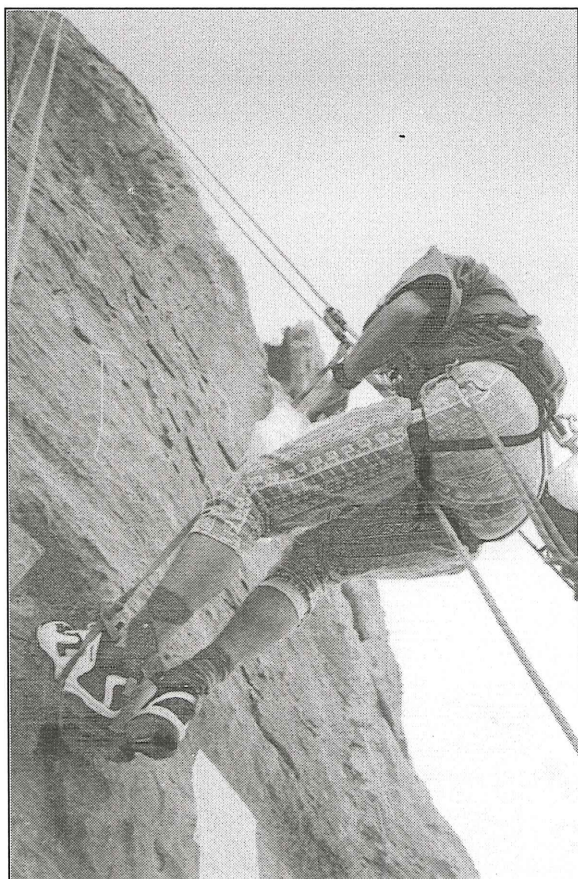
3. a-c The working platform.

sion. As the light was too contrasty for good quality pictures, efforts were concentrated on a squeeze on blotting paper. This worked out well in the end, despite unusual working positions and windy weather. One whole afternoon was spent covering all the left part of the engraved surface. Finally, a large sheet of transparent plastic was fixed, covering the whole surface of the sculpted area. The iconographic elements were traced on it as well as the location of each of the 16 sheets of special paper used for squeezes, (Figs. 4 and 5).

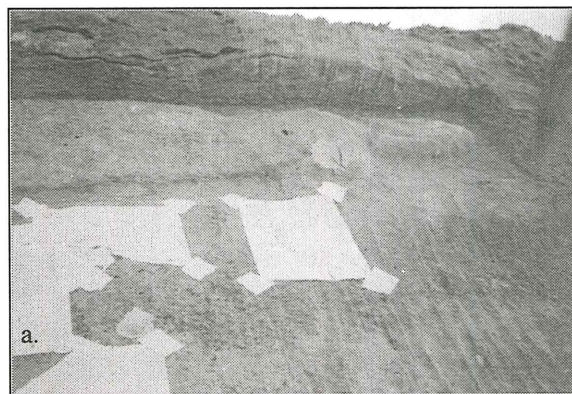
The experiment with modern rock climb-

ing methods helped to evaluate the kind of problems that might have been faced some 2500 years ago. It is considered most probable, that the manner used to carve the rock was at that time the same as described above to reach the sculpture. The place is exceptionally well adapted and it was probably carefully chosen for the convenient platform available above the inscription : it is an exceptional working place from which to operate.

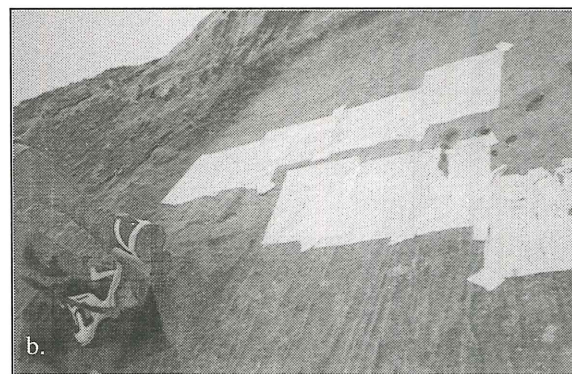
Going down a vertical cliff can be done with ropes. Engraving the rock on a surface of six square metres, with relief and about 30 lines of writing requires complementary techniques. There are no traces of any important scaffolding, nor of any terrace below the sculpted area but some small holes (3 to 6 cm across) were observed in the rock, on the sculpted area and around it. They make up two horizontal lines. One of these lines is on the sculpted area, 25 cm



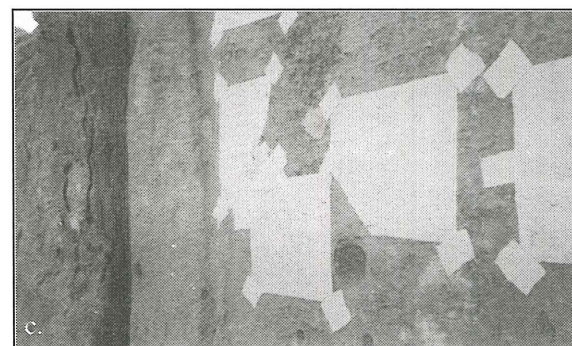
4. climbing up on the rope .



a.



b.



c.

5. a-c The squeeze drying on the rock .

from its bottom. The other is about 50 cm above the sculpture on the natural rock. Some other holes are irregularly located (Figs. 6 and 5 c). All these could have been insertion points for light scaffolding, or probably rather complementary supports for the engravers. The use of ropes must have been well-known, combined with agility and ingenuity.

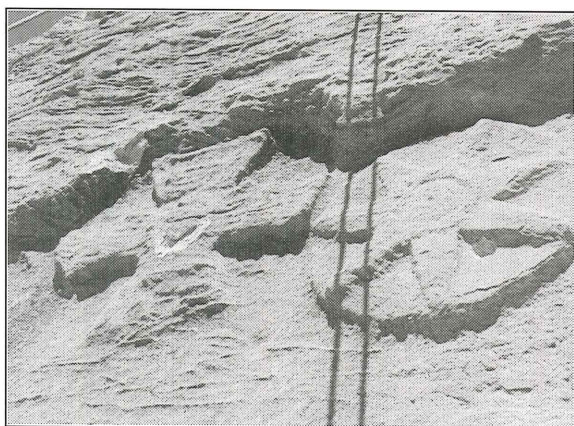
Conservation of the Relief

The sandstone is irregularly eroded. The figure and the three divine symbols are rel-

atively well preserved, but there are neither details nor decorations. The rest of the surface was originally covered by the inscription. It has suffered a lot over time, and the text has partly disappeared, mainly on the right hand side of the sculpted area. In the middle, parts of the writing are preserved but sometimes in such a weathered state that it is impossible to decipher. Luckily two areas are quite clear. One is located near the dignitary on the left, and the other on the right and below the solar symbol. The state of preservation of the relief is very poor, but nevertheless allows conclusions about the date and attribution.

The sculpture has suffered from recent damages. A previous attempt to reach the place left some traces of rubber, a burned patch on the right of the inscription and a wooden beam fallen below, in the middle of the rock slope. More worrying, there are four bullet marks, one on the inscription, and three on the relief. The marksman aimed to reach the chest of the king and the centre of the symbols. Those impacts are quite visible and have generated a fragile zone where the protective outer surface of the sandstone has disappeared (Figs. 7 and 5 a).

To protect the rock cliff itself from human and natural erosion would not be easy so to make a cast would be a good measure to keep a record of the sculpture before further deterioration.



6. Central winged disc (left) and sun or star disc (right).

Nabonidus in Edom (S. Dalley)

The rock relief at Sela' near at-Ṭafilah in southern Jordan shows the standing figure of a Mesopotamian king facing right, three divine symbols, and patches of badly eroded cuneiform inscription. All these are set within a rectangular area of smoothed rock-face, with a small extension at the top centre to help accommodate the top of the winged disk. It has characteristics which allow the king to be identified with near certainty as Nabonidus (555-539 BC).

First, there are three large, divine symbols: a moon disk nearest the king, a central winged disk and a sun or star disk. They are placed centrally in such a way as to make it clear that three is the complete number. Neo-Assyrian monuments, both rock reliefs and free-standing stelae, always have more than three symbols, usually between 5



7. The King's figure.

and 8; but the neo-Babylonian stelae of Nabonidus from Harran have the same three symbols as the new rock relief.

Second, the king holds in his left hand a long staff touching the ground in front of him, in a vertical position. Assyrian kings almost always hold a short mace at an angle.¹ Nebuchadnezzar II, for whom very few portraits are known, is best exemplified by the two rock reliefs at Wādī Brisa, on which he is shown fighting a lion and standing before a tree; he wears the same type of pointed conical crown as Nabonidus wears at Harran, but the stance is different and the long staff absent. A combination of crown, stance, staff and symbols has allowed a stela, bought in Babylon, to be ascribed to Nabonidus² by direct comparison with the two Harran stelae, and exactly the same criteria allow this rock relief to be assigned.

The headgear on the royal figure on the rock relief, as shown in outline in A.Goguel's drawing (Fig. 8), has the conical cap with a top point identical to that of Nebuchadnezzar II at Wādī Brisa and to that of Nabonidus at Harran. This crown can be distinguished clearly from the crowns worn on such monuments by Assyrian kings and by Merodach-Baladan II (c.700 BC) on the Berlin kudurru. We may note too that the eighth century ruler of Suhu, *Šamaš-reš-usur*, whose dynasty claimed descent from Babylonian, not Assyrian, kings, nevertheless wears a flat-topped crown and holds a short mace at an angle just like contemporary Assyrian kings. Achaemenid kings never wear crowns of the type worn

by Nabonidus on the Harran stelae.

The characteristics of crown, stance, staff and symbols allow us to identify the standing figure on the side of the Louvre Tayma stela as Nabonidus. But since the figure is positioned in such a subsidiary place, it does not allow us to date the stela to the reign of Nabonidus, for it could represent an old royal figure which continued to be revered at Tayma in subsequent centuries. The second stela from Tayma does not show the king but does have the same three divine symbols as monuments of Nabonidus.³

The traces of inscription, as photographed from squeezes (Figs. 9-11), give Babylonian, not Assyrian, sign forms for KI and LÚ or LUGAL, two of the few signs that are both recognizable and distinctive in this respect. They are in keeping with the sign forms on the Harran stelae. But they are not necessarily diagnostic by themselves, because Assyrian stone inscriptions frequently use Babylonian sign forms as well as Assyrian forms. To quote the words of Professor Grayson in the context of a stone inscription of Sennacherib, "The script of this document displays the usual characteristics of Sennacherib's stone inscriptions... a consistent use of Babylonian forms for certain signs... and an erratic use of different forms of the same sign."⁴ The author cannot read any consecutive, meaningful groups of signs from the excellent photographs taken from squeezes.

The identification of Nabonidus on the new rock relief depends upon similarities with the Harran stelae. Fig. 12 are drawings

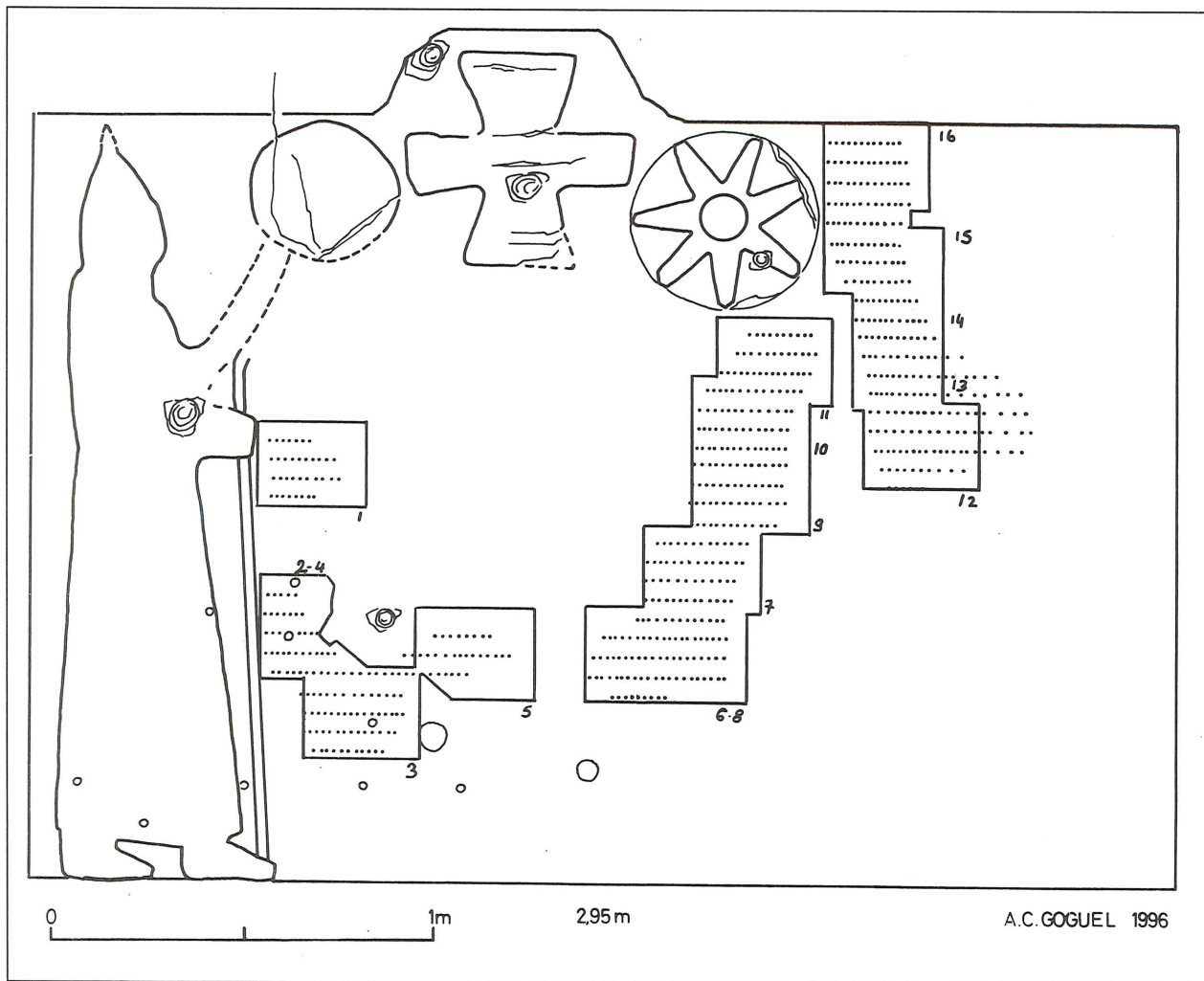
1. Sargon II is shown with a similar, long staff on a palace relief from Khorsabad now in the British Museum, see e.g. J.E.Reade, *Assyrian sculpture*. London 1983: pl.38, but it is held at a slight slant. The same is true of his contemporary Merodach-Baladan II on the Berlin kudurru, see e.g. G.R.Meyer, *Altorientalische Denkmäler*: no.142; but these kings can be eliminated because of different crowns and symbols.

2. British Museum, WA 90837. D.Collon, *Ancient Near Eastern Art*. London 1995: 231 is probably

wrong to identify the figure as a god, given the close comparisons with the Harran stelae; see C.J.Gadd, *AS* 8, 1958: pls.II and III. W.Röllig, *Erwägungen zu neuen Stelen König Nabonids*. ZA 56,1994: 247-48 identifies the figure as king; so do P.-A. Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus*. Yale 1989: caption to pl.1.

3. *Atlat* 4, 1980: pl.69.

4. A.K.Grayson, *The Walters Art Gallery Inscription of Sennacherib*. *Afo* 20, 1963: 88-89.



8. Location of the squeeze on the rock relief.

of the two Harran stelae and of the Babylon stela, to show the comparisons. It seems certain that Nabonidus was depicted on his official monuments in a way that distinguishes him from his various predecessors and from his Achaemenid successors. No other rock reliefs of Nabonidus have been found.

Sela' lies in northern Edom. When Nabonidus travelled from Babylonia to north-west Arabia, it is generally thought that his route would have taken him through the Fertile Crescent and down into Edom rather than straight across the north of the Arabian desert.⁵ For this route seems confirmed by

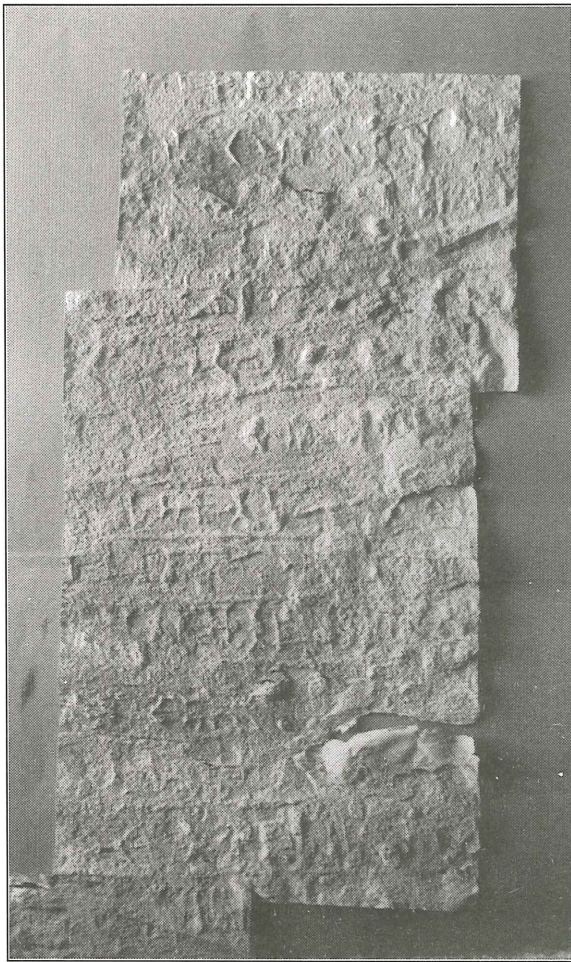
the slight restoration [*u*]-*du-um-mu* "Edom" in line 17 of the Nabonidus chronicle.⁶ The most probable historical background against which the Sela' rock relief was carved is therefore Nabonidus' journey down through Edom towards Tayma. Whether Nabonidus went to stay in Tayma in his third or a later year is still uncertain, although years 3 to 4 seem most likely. Presumably the eroded inscription would have narrated details of this campaign.

As our sources are at present, the expedition is briefly described in one of the Harran stela texts, and may have been broken away

5. I. Eph'al, *The Ancient Arabs*. Jerusalem 1982:185-188.

6. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*.

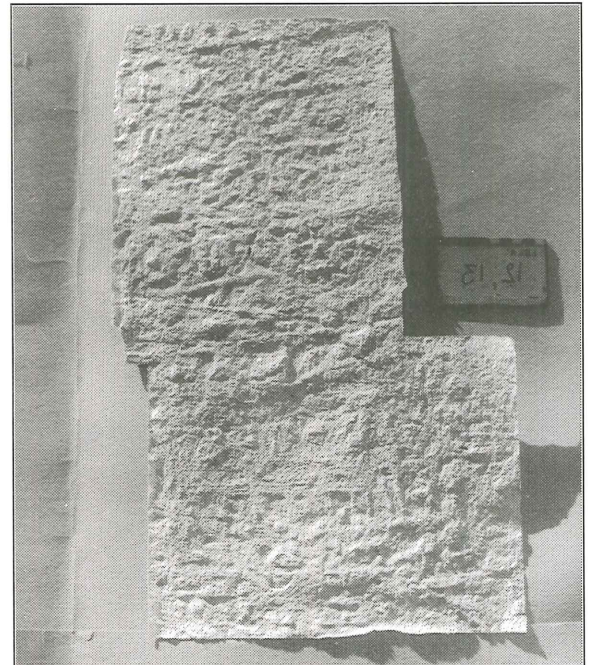
New York 1975:105 with corrigenda on p.282; P-A. Beaulieu, *The reign of Nabonidus*:166.



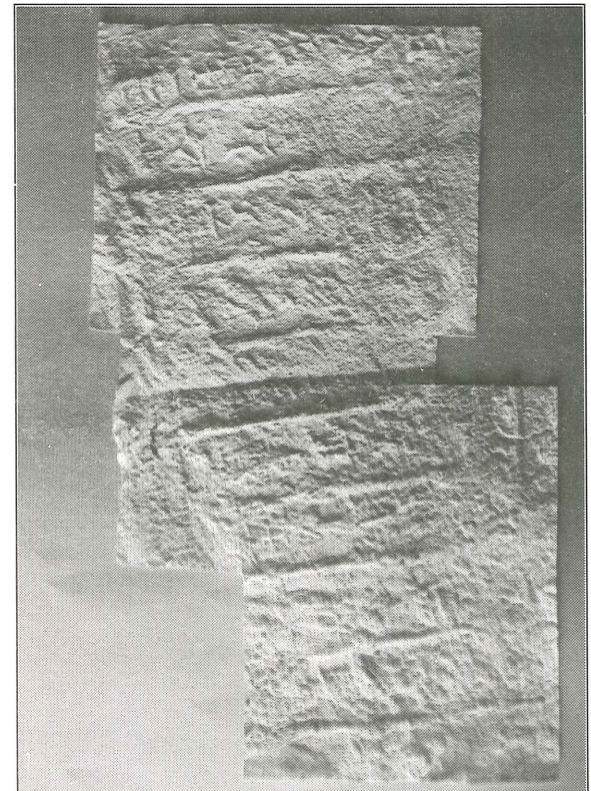
9. Squeezes 9, 10, 11.

in the “King of Justice” inscription in the lines preceding *[niš] inagî nesûti* “people of far-distant regions” in rev.col.V 22-25.⁷ It features in the Nabonidus Chronicle in the third(?) year, preceded by Hume (Cilicia) and Hamath in the preceding years.

The presence of the rock relief implies that Edom was under Babylonian administration in the reign of Nabonidus. Nabonidus’ subjugation of Edom may possibly be the cause of destruction levels at Buşayra, Ṭawilān and Tall al-Khalayfi, although other explanations could be given.⁸



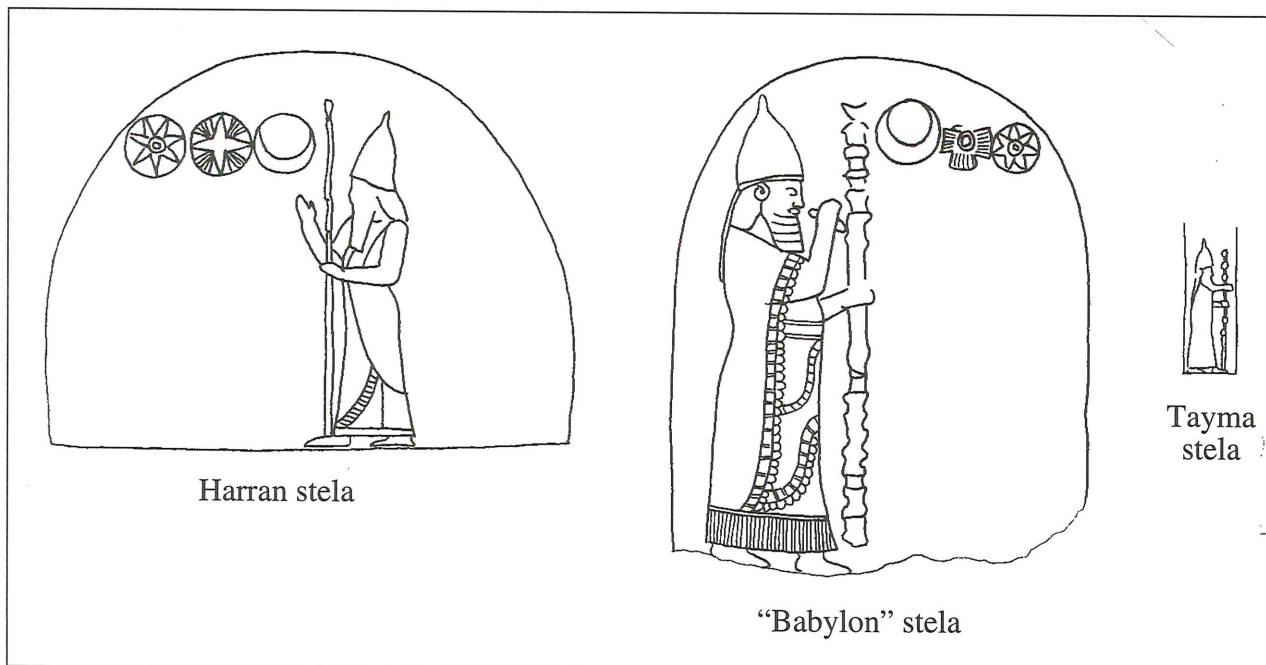
10. Squeezes 12, 13.



11. Squeezes 14, 15, 16.

7. *Cuneiform Texts in the British Museum* 46 1965: no.45; W.G.Lambert, *Iraq* 27, 1965: 1-11, with reattribution by P.Berger, *ZA* 64, 1974: 222 and von Soden, *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran, Ergänzungsband* 10, 1983: 63, unfortunately not

followed by Beaulieu, *Reign of Nabonidus*:4. Read *MES not sar before nagi*.
8. J.R.Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites. Journal of the Society for Old Testament Studies. Suppl. Series* 77, 1989: 159.



12. Harran stela, "Babylon stela", Tayma stela.

Acknowledgements

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perience of rock climbing in Wādī Rumm and enthusiastically agreed to support the project. All photographs were taken by A. Goguel.

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