

A SAFAITIC INSCRIPTION IN THE AMMAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM*

by
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The inscription under discussion was noticed by the author, among others in the Antiquities shop of the late Mahmud el Afghani who generously gave the whole collection to the Museum.¹ He claimed it was found in the Umm el Jimal area but this origin cannot be confirmed. It is a basalt slab, measuring 32 by 18 by 8 cm. (Fig. 1&2), registered under the no J. 13157. The letters which are well engraved, average 3 to 7 cm. The inscription which runs from right to left, terminates with the seven symbolic strokes.

I'qrb bn hn't d'ltm wndm 'l mh trht wbny 'lh

by 'Aqrab son of Hani'at of the tribe of Taim and he
grieved for his mother, she died and he built upon her.

All of the personal names occur in the Cairn of Hani.² According to G.L. Harding, Taim "is suggested as a possible tribe because of its wide distribution from Jebel Druze to Badana"³ (in Eastern Saudi Arabia, Tapline). It is known as a personal name in Nabataean, Thamudic Liḥyanite and Safaitic.



Fig. 1 Safaitic Inscription J. 13157.

* I am grateful to Mrs Randa Goussous for the drawing and to B. Darkejian for the photography;

trh is usually translated as a participle⁴: “stricken with grief,” as a verb “to mourn” or as a noun⁵. It appears here in the 3rd person, feminine perfect and relates in this case to the subject *'amh* and not to the writer *'Aqrab*. Thus, the rendering of the form by the participle would be, unsatisfactory. A derivation from the 5th or 6th form of *ترو* “to be at rest” would refer to the deceased and correspond to Greek *ἀναπαύω* or Latin *requiescere*, both very common on the funeral texts. However, the absence of *waw* is problematic. An Ar. verb *تج*, meaning “he perished, or died: became cut off: was put an end to; or came to an end,” is quoted on the authority of Ibn al-Athir, el Jaziri and Taj el 'Arus.⁶

In the Cairn of Hani, *تج* is attested in 14 instances, 10 with the expression *bny 'l wwjm 'l*; in two instances, *bny 'l* is accompanied by the compliment *hrjm* “the cairn.” This new translation invites the specialists to reconsider the interpretation of the Safaitic cairns. Professor A. Jamme,⁷ relying on his excavations in the country of 'Ar'ar rejects the tomb explanation of these monuments. According to him, the cairns are “landmarks” or “rally signs”.⁸ To elucidate the significance of the cairns, he refers to modern usages: “The bedouins of today do the very same. According to where they happen to stop, they use a cairn, a boulder or the side of a mountain”.⁹ If modern Arab customs are relevant to interpret Safaitic monuments, it is certainly more appropriate to quote Archimandrite Boulos Salman in his interesting report on Transjordanian traditions:

“The bedouins used to build a great pile of stones for heros who fell in battle, which they call '*rujūm*.'... There is a *rujūm* in Wadi Mūjib to indicate the battlefield between the Sukhur and Beni Hamideh tribes.”¹¹ He then comes to '*rujaim el 'abd*': as believed by the bedouins, a negro ('abd) roams around, in the night, killing anyone he meets. “If a bedouin passes near the cairn, during the day, he takes a stone from the road and throws it upon the cairn, saying: ‘shut your mouth O 'abd.’”¹² This gesture is supposed to appease the spirit under the cairn. The same custom was practiced by the local bedouins when G.L. Harding excavated the Cairn of Hani¹³, and it was explained to him that the cairn was built “over those who were killed” only. Safaitic inscriptions which refer to killed tribesmen are very common¹⁴. Hani, a holy man of the desert, was killed by an arrow as demonstrated by the excavations. The finding of “perishable” objects

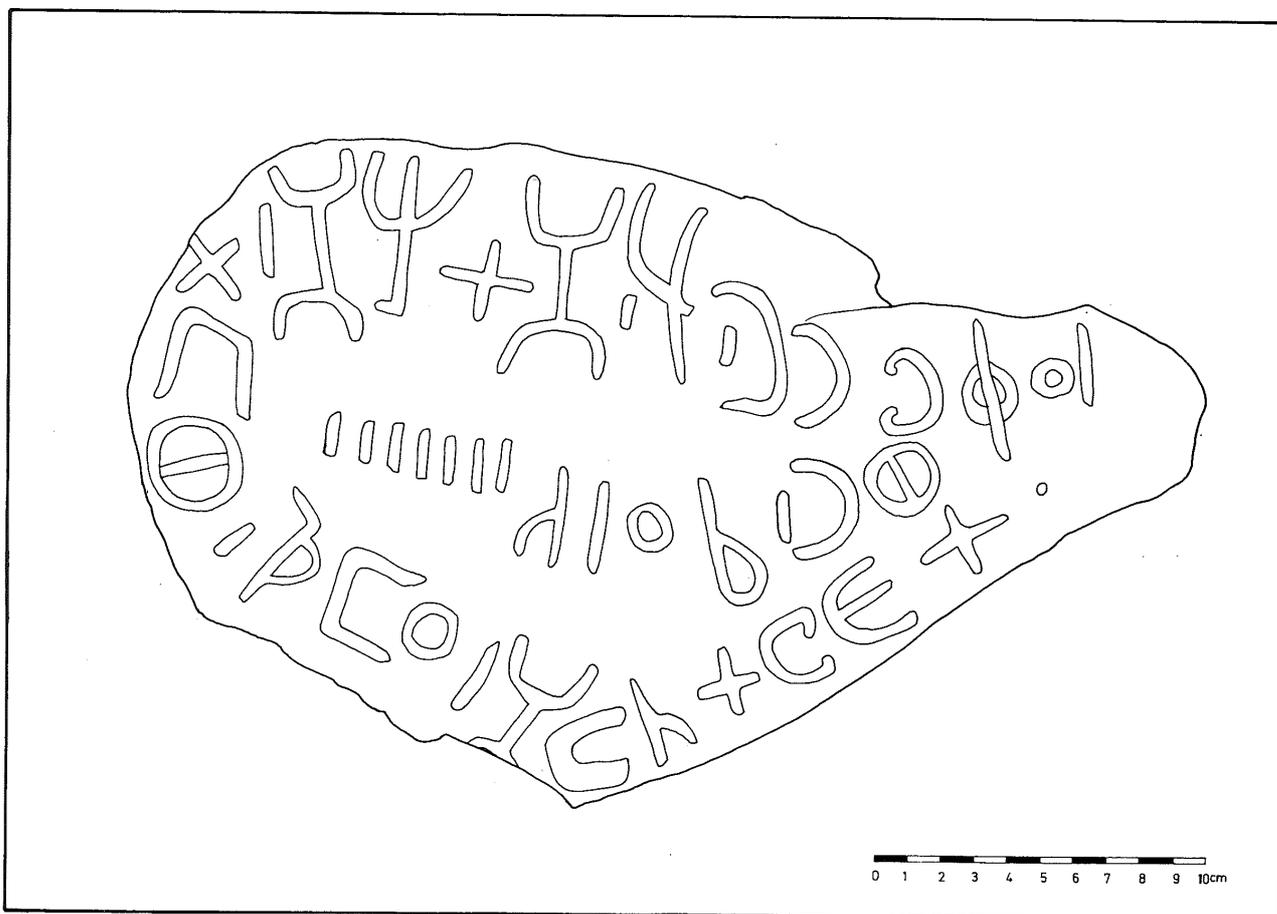


Fig. 2.

which are used as an argument by A. Jamme¹⁵ to defend his thesis is not an obstacle: I can provide him with fragments of leather discovered in Byzantine tombs of Muhayy in Southern Jordan. No doubt the dry climate of the desert favours the preservation of such material.

On the other hand, it is well known that cairns were built upon burials in the Prehistoric¹⁶ and Early Bronze periods.¹⁷ In the intermediate EB-MB period (2200 - 1900 B.C.) they are related to nomadic invaders. I see no objection why the Pre-Islamic tribes of the desert could not use a similar tradition, still alive in modern times.

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Footnotes

1. Other inscriptions of the same collection have been published by M.C.A. Macdonald in *ADAJ* XXIII (1979) p.101ff.
2. G.L. Harding, *ADAJ* II (1953) p.8ff. Henceforth: *HCH*.
3. *Al-Abhath* XII vol. 3-4 (1969) p. 21.
4. Cf. *HCH* and F.V. Winnett, *Safaitic Inscriptions from Jordan*, Toronto (1957).
5. A. Jamme, *Orientalia*, 36 (1967) p.161.
6. E.W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, London (1863-1893) reprinted Librairie du Liban, Beirut (1968). I am indebted to M.C.A. Macdonald for this reference and many other suggestions.
7. In Franz Altheim und Ruth Stiehl, *Christentum am Roten Meer I*, Berlin-New York (1971) p.42.
8. *Ibid.* p.43.
9. *Ibid.* p.43; the author contradicts himself in *Orientalia*, 36 (1967) p. 170 when he states: "The whole question is to prove that the Saf population had the same custom"...
10. خمسة اعوام في شرقي الأردن - حريصا - لبنان ١٩٢٩
11. *Ibid.* p. 197.
12. *Ibid.* p.198.
13. *HCH* p.8.
14. For example *HCH* N°s 71, 126, 154, 72, 76, 103; V.A. Clark, *Abar Nahrain* XVII (1976-77) p. 37, re-examined by M.C.A. Macdonald in this issue: see also J.T. Milik, "La tribu des bani 'Amrat en Jordanie" in this issue.
15. *Al-Machriq* 64 fasc.3 (1970) p. 324.
16. V.A. Clark, *ADAJ* XXIII (1979) p. 60ff.
17. P.W. Lapp, *The Dhar Mirzbaneh Tombs*, New Haven (1966) p. 95.