

## A New Safaitic Inscription Dated to 12-9 BC\*

The inscription under discussion measures 30 x 25cm. It was found in Wādī al-Ḥashad, 45km northeast of aṣ-Ṣafāwī (previously known as H5) near the Jordanian-Syrian borders, at 750m above sea level (FIG. 1). The inscriptions of this wadi are characterized by their relative length and by their resemblance to the inscriptions of the nearby Wādī Salma. It seems that the wadi was a site where many Arab tribes converged and met, especially during the winter season when the wadi is warm and green, and pasturage is available. Bedouins today still use the wadi during winter for the same reasons. Trade caravans from Syria used to cross the wadi on their way to

Wādī as-Sirḥān.

The inscription was inscribed on a smooth surfaced basalt stone, fit for inscribing long thin letters on. The inscriber utilized a pointed sharp tool. The inscription is composed of four spiral connected lines, with 89 letters (FIG. 2).

The importance of this inscription lies in the fact that it gives us a precise and definite date, and includes a new verb ('ḥb) and the word (ḡwt), as they have not appeared in Safaitic inscriptions before.

### Transliteration

*L tm bn msk bn qtl bn brd bn ḥmt wwjm 'l ḡyr w'l qtl w'l mtl snt 'ty sly mrm whrs h snt fh b'lsmn ḡwt wslm wqbl lḏ 'ḥb.*

### Translation

By Taim b. Msk b. Qtl b. Brd b. Ḥmt and he grieved for Gyr and for Qtl and for Mtl in the year that Syllaeus came from Rome, and he was on the look-out for this year. O Ba'al-samin grant succour and security and acceptance, to him who is in love.

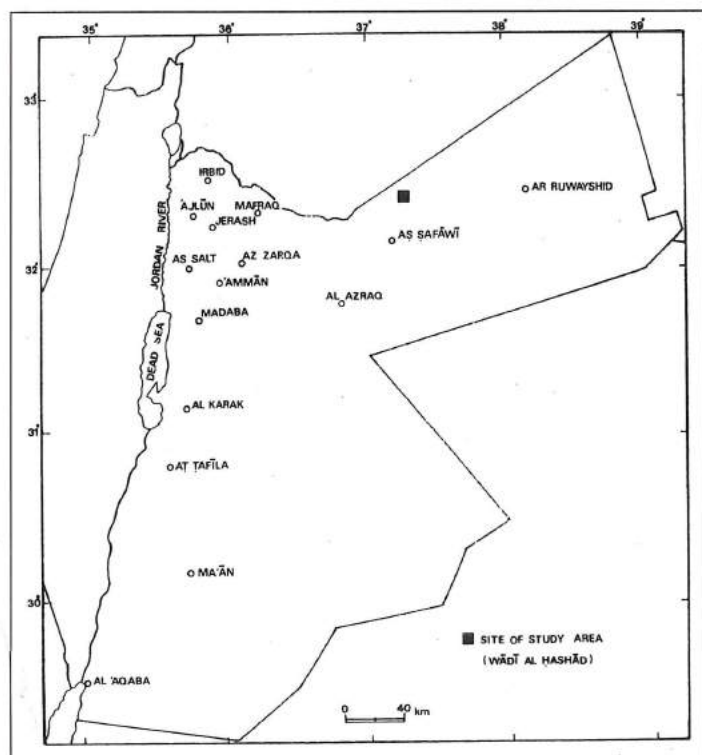
### Commentary

*Tm and Msk:* These names were mentioned in Safaitic, and in other North Semitic Onomastica (Abbadi 1996a: 242; 1997a: 227).

*Qtl:* is known in Safaitic (Littmann 1943: 342; Harding 1971: 476; Winnett and Harding 1978: 602).

*Brd:* A familiar name in Safaitic (Harding 1971: 101), in Thamudic (King 1990: 478), in Nabataean *Brdw* (Negev 1991: 17) and in Arabic (Ibn-Doried 1979: 136). I met a Bedouin named (Burad), he informed me that he was given this name on account of having been born on a night when it rained hail.

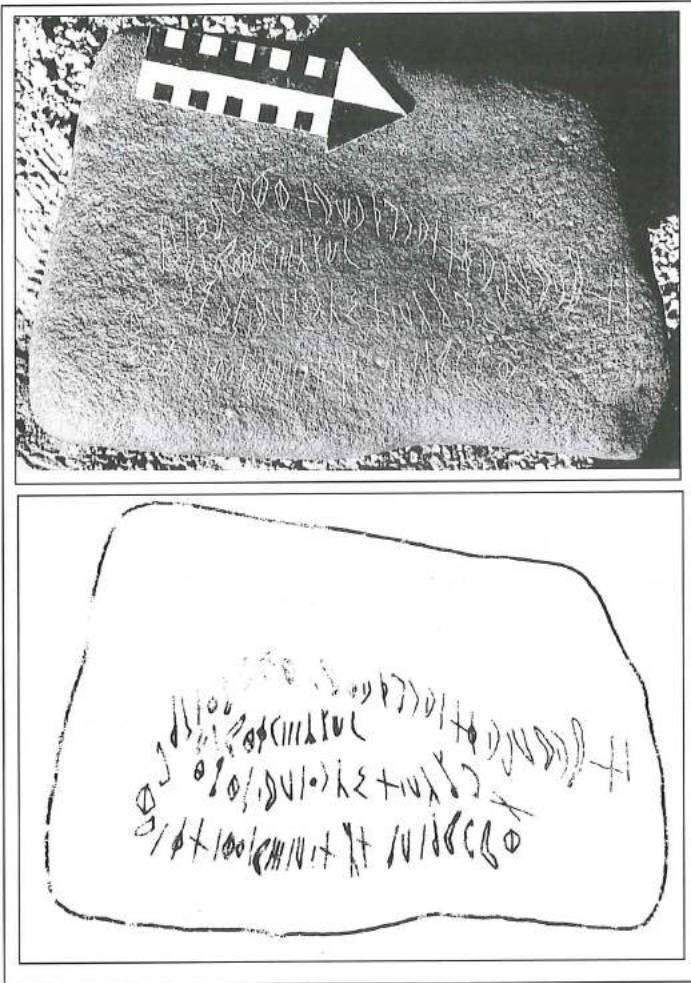
*Ḥmt:* This name was mentioned in Safaitic (Harding 1971: 199; Winnett and Harding 1978: 569; Clark 1980: No.



1. Map of Jordan showing the site of the study area.

\* Editor's note: this inscription is published in Arabic by the same author, see Abbadi 1997c.





2. The inscription.

699).

*w*: Conjunction "and", passim. *wgm*: verb meaning "to grieve, mourn". *l*: preposition meaning "for" (Abbadi 1998: 122).

*Gyr*: This name occurred in Safaitic (Littmann 1943: 337; Harding 1971: 460).

*Ml*: Mentioned twice in Safaitic, one of which the reading is unintelligible (Harding 1971: 551), in Thamudic (King 1990: 547).

*snt*: Year.

*'ty*: Came. This verb is mentioned in Safaitic (Littmann 1943: 301; CIS: No. 860; Winnett 1957: No. 78).

*Sly*: Corresponds to Nabataean "Sullay" and to Syllaeus in Classical sources. Littmann (1914: 39; 1953: 25) vocalized the name "Shullai or Sullai" or considered it as an emphatic of "Sulaim" or "Sallai". The interpretation of Jawad 'Ali (1976, Vol. 2: 44) as "Ṣāliḥ" is not correct in my opinion.

*m*: preposition meaning "from".

*Rm*: Rome or the Romans (see below).

*hṛs*: To look for, to be on the look-out (Abbadi 1996b:

243).

*fh*: Vocative article "O".

*B'lsmn*: "The Lord of Heaven". The god name was frequently used in Safaitic and was connected with agriculture as he was asked to grant rainwater in some Safaitic inscriptions (CIS: No. 2803; Winnett and Harding 1978: No. 2143). He was also offered sacrifices (CIS: Nos. 4358, 4360, 4409). One of the Safaitic inscriptions mentioned *fhb'l smn 'lh s''*, Clark (1980: No. 424) interpreted *s''* as the town of Si' mentioned in Classical sources, it is not far from the town of Suwayda in southern Ḥawrān, and so the meaning of the phrase becomes *B'lsmn* the god of Si', or it could be (*'L hs''*) but the former interpretation is better. It was built for that god of the temple in Si' (Littmann 1914: No. 100). One of the Nabataean inscriptions mentions that he is a god for the Nabataean King Mālik/ Malichus (56-29 BC) (Khairy 1981: 25-6). A temple was built for him in the city of Palmyra (Teixidor 1979: 20), he was also worshipped in the city of Hatra (Abbadi 1983: 59; Aggoula 1991: 195). Likewise, he was worshipped by the Lihyanites (Jaussen and Savignac 1914: 405, 484 Nos. 64, 194). That god was known to the Canaanites and Phoenicians from the beginning of the first millennium BC (Donner and Röllig 1973: No. 4).

*ḡwt*: A new word in the Safaitic corpus: "a cry for aid or succour" (Lane 1968: 2306). This word occurred in Safaitic as a personal name (Harding 1971: 459; Winnett and Harding 1978: No. 3086b).

*qbl*: Acceptance (Abbadi 1996a: 245).

*ld*: To him who (Abbadi 1997b: 84).

*'hb*: A new verb meaning "one who loved".

The most important sentence is *Snt 'ty Sly m rm*: The year Sullay came from Rome. The epigraphists interpret *Rm* in the Safaitic inscriptions as Rome or the Romans (Littman 1943: 343; Winnett and Harding 1978: 579). However, M. Macdonald (1993: 330-32) interpreted it as a tribe name, except for one inscription, without providing any evidence. Some scholars may believe that the name *Rm* means *Wādī Ramm*, but the real name of this wadi is *Iram*, as it appears in one inscription near the water reservoir of al-Qūṣayr, at the foot of Jabal al-Judaydah (Savignac 1932: 592-593 "May be remembered Ḥayan son of 'Abdallahi, son of Ibn-'atmou, in front of Allāt, the goddess who dwells in Iram"). The same name appears in another inscription of Wādī Iram (Savignac 1933: 408). This name of the valley is confirmed by the Holy Qur'an, Surat 89: 6-9: "Seest thou not how thy Lord dealt with the 'Ad (people), of the (city of) Iram, with lofty pillars, the like of which were not produced in (all) the land, and with Thamūd (people), who cut out (huge) rocks in the valley?"

Concerning Sullay whose name is mentioned in this inscription, he was famous under Obodas III (30-9 BC). Strabo in his *Geography* 16, 4, 24, records: "This came to



pass because Obodas, the king, did not care much about public affairs and particularly military affairs, and because he put everything in the power of Syllaes". Similarly, Josephus, *Ant.* XVI, 7.6 described Obodas as being "inactive and sluggish by nature; for the most part his realm was governed by Syllaes". The same author qualified Syllaes as being a shrewd man although he was but young and handsome. Strabo accused Syllaes of being the cause of the failure of Aelius Gallus expedition to Arabia Felix (*Geog.* 16, 4:25). According to this author, the intention of the Nabataean minister was "to spy out the country and, along with the Romans, to destroy some of its cities and tribes, and then to establish himself lord of all, after the Romans were wiped out by hunger and fatigue and diseases." (*Geog.* 16.4.24).

Syllaes paid several visits to Herod the Great and fell in love with his sister Salome and asked for her hand. However, Herod imposed on him to convert to Judaism which he declined, claiming that he would be stoned by his people (*Ant.* XVI, 7.6). After the failure of his love, the relations worsened. Herod travelled to Rome and the tribes of the Trachonitis (the Lijja) revolted against him. His generals quelled the revolt. The tribe leaders fled to the fortress of Raeptra (Qal'at ar-Rabaḍ in 'Ajlūn). On his return, Herod asked Syllaes to deliver the rebellious tribesmen. He also urged him to repay the debt king Obodas received by his intermediary. The case was presented to the Governors of Syria, Saturminus and Volumnius who confirmed Herod in his complaint. But Syllaes refused to comply. He journeyed to Rome to expose the case at the court of Augustus. During his sojourn to Rome, Herod attacked the rebellious tribesmen and captured them. This attack was reported to Syllaes in Rome who reported the matter to Augustus and exaggerated the number of killed tribesmen. Augustus was angry and sent a message of threat to Herod (*Ant.* XVI, 9.1.2.3). During one of his visits to Rome, he left an inscription in Nabataean and Greek at the port of Miletus, in Asia Minor: "Syllaes, brother of the king son of Taymu, this offering for the life of Obodas the king in the month of ..." (Lidzbarski 1915: 89; Meshorer 1975: 37f). The expression "brother of the king" means that he was the epitropos or first minister of the king (*Geog.* 353). This inscription could be dated in 12-9 BC.

After Obodas' death, Aretas IV assumed the function of the king of the Nabataeans, without asking the permission of Augustus who was dissatisfied with Aretas. Meanwhile, Aretas IV dispatched gifts to Augustus and accused Syllaes of having poisoned Obodas (*Ant.* XVI, 9.4). Nicolas of Damascus who happened to be in Rome informed Augustus of the treachery of Syllaes who was accused of having poisoned Obodas and several Nabataean dignitaries. Augustus ordered Syllaes to be executed (*Ant.* XVI, 10.8-9).

## Conclusion

The writer of the inscription dated his inscription by the return of Syllaes from Rome because he was an outstanding personality and his influence with the Bedouin tribes of the Syrian desert was great. Like the other Bedouin tribes, this man expected the return of Syllaes, to protect them from Herod the Great. The inscription, which mentions *snt ḥrb Nbṭ Yhd* (the year of the Nabataean Jewish war) in Wādī al-Ḥashad (Abbadi 1996b: 239-253) probably refers to the attacks of Herod the Great on the Safaitic tribes of the Lijja.

At the time I thought that it referred to one of these wars between both sides (96-40 BC), and it is a fact that many wars have taken place between both parties. The earliest one is dated to 90 BC, which occurred between Alexander Jannaeus and Obodas I, and another war in 30 BC between Herod the Great and Malichus I, and a later war occurred in AD 36 between Aretas IV and Herod Antipas (Abbadi 1996b: 244-245). Actually the inscription does not go back to that date, I believe it refers to the war waged by Herod the Great against the Nabataeans, when there was heightened tension between him and Sullay (12-9 BC), especially when we note that both inscriptions were found near each other. That is why I believe the two inscriptions refer to the same event. The pertinent inscription is dated to the year in which Sullay came from Rome (12-9 BC) and the other inscription gives the date of the Nabataean-Jewish war, in actual fact, they both refer to the same event.

The Sullay inscription, on the other hand, contradicts the theory of Winnett who stated that the square script is the oldest Safaitic script, dating to the first century BC (Winnett 1957:19). Nevertheless, a Safaitic inscription in the Square script was dated to Nepos, governor of the Provincia Arabia in AD 132-134 (Abbadi and Zayadine 1996: 160-161), which also contradicts the hypothesis of Winnett.

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