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Nabataean, Ancient North Arabian, Greek, and Latin Inscriptions from Bāyir (Southeast Jordan): A Reassessment

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the inscriptions which were discovered in the area of Bāyir during the surveys conducted by the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of Yarmouk University and by the Italian IsMEO of Rome in the 1990s. Bāyir, situated in the steppe at the head of Wādī Bāyir leading to Wādī As Sarḥān, is famous for its wells. A collection of inscribed stone blocks and pebbles from the site of Bāyir and the surrounding area is kept at Yarmouk University. Some of them, bearing Semitic graffiti, have been published by the late Fawwaz Al-Khraysheh and by Hani Hayajneh. Greek and Latin texts are much rarer and represent evidence of the presence of the Roman army in this part of *Provincia Arabia*. Two limestone slabs with Latin graffiti and two with Greek graffiti were published by

Jacqueline Calzini Gysens in 1993, and another Greek inscription was recently published by Pierre-Louis Gatier. The Latin texts need to be reassessed and two unpublished Latin inscriptions need to be added to this small group.

Wādī Bāyir Geographical Setting

The site of Bāyir, whose toponym refers to the wells, lies a little to the east of the present road, which joins Al Azraq to Maʿān from the northeast to the southwest. The site is halfway between these two cities, about 120km from each. As the crow flies, some 100km separate Bāyir from the large market town of Aṭṭāfilah to the west, and from the great north/south axis that is the Wādī As Sarḥān to the east, the long corridor that connects the Jawf oasis to Al Azraq (FIG. 1). The site is located on the limestone eastern edge of the Jordanian plateau, which is traversed by dry valleys

that run towards the Wādī As Sarhān, including that of the northeast-facing Wādī Bāyir and the Wādī As Si'r. Bāyir, in an area of arid ridges, is known to the scholarly world through the brief stays of a few travelers and through surveys conducted by several archaeological teams. The site is still in need of excavation.

Travelers and Archaeologists

Before 1918, some European travelers stopped at Bāyir, including Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, Douglas Carruthers, Alois Musil, and Gertrude Bell. During the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1917, all four wells at the site were dynamited by the Turks, but the reactivation of two of them allowed the Arab insurgents and the famous Thomas Edward Lawrence “of Arabia” to use Bāyir as a base for departure and retreat in several military operations. Travelers have especially noticed the remains of a castle, which was considered Nabataean by some, Ghassanid/Jafnid or Umayyad by others.

During the British Mandate, a first archaeological survey was led by Henry Field in 1927 and 1928, particularly devoted to prehistoric flints. Nelson Glueck in 1932 made a brief visit to the site with George and Agnes Horsfield. They were the first to take an interest in the numerous pottery sherds of Bāyir. Between 1928 and 1932, the remains of the castle were destroyed and a fort for the Arab Legion was built with their stones on a nearby hill. The 1981 survey led by Scott Rolston and Gary Rollefson resulted in a new collection of pottery sherds and, most importantly for our subject, in the first study of North Arabian graffiti by Vincent Clark (Clark 1987). In the same year, Geoffrey King's team, prospecting Byzantine and Islamic sites, collected ceramic sherds at Bāyir.

The pottery sherds indicate a Nabataean and maybe Roman occupation of the site. The main archaeological issue is that of the so-called castle destroyed in 1932. Its date is uncertain, since it could be Nabataean, Roman, Ghassanid, Umayyad, or a building of several periods. Its function is also uncertain: it has been labelled a “khan”, or an aristocratic residence, or a small fortress (see Gatier 2018 about the history of research at Bāyir).

Epigraphical Studies and the Yarmouk University Collection

Two short visits were made by the Epigraphy Section of Yarmouk University in 1988 and in 1989 (Bāyir I), and a first extensive and systematic survey took place in June 1990 (Bāyir II). The area investigated was east of the Wādī Bāyir on the plain of the Wādī Al Ukhaydir As Sāth. Eighty Ancient North Arabian inscriptions, one Nabataean short text, and four Greek and Latin graffiti have been collected and prepared for publication. In June 1993, the third season of Bāyir's comprehensive Epigraphic Survey (Bāyir III) was organized in collaboration between the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO; Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente) has covered an area situated northeast of Qasr Bāyir, in a range from 4 to 12km, on the plain between the Wādī Bāyir and its tributary, the Wādī Al Si'r. Most of the inscriptions were found on the hill ridges overlooking the *wadi*.

Altogether, 64 Ancient North Arabian/Hismaic texts were recorded, as well as three Nabataean graffiti, a bilingual Nabataean/Safaitic inscription (Al-Khraysheh 1994), five short Greek or Latin graffiti, a longer Greek graffiti

(15 lines), and several short texts of an Islamic date, among which some are in Kufic Arabic. No rock art has been found so far, but several modern tribal signs (or *wusum*) cover the ancient inscriptions, suggesting the regularity of the itineraries used during transigrations.

A collection of about 104 inscribed stone blocks and pebbles from the site of Bāyir and the surrounding area is kept at Yarmouk University. A preliminary study of the remaining ANA inscriptions of Wādī Bāyir that are currently housed at the storerooms of the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology shows that they follow the Hismaic type in terms of the script, structure, and contents. The values of the graphemes (*t*, *g*), and (*d*) are confirmed in the Wādī Bāyir collection.

The first contribution (= W.Bāyir-YU 1)¹ about Bāyir inscriptions was published by Al-Khraysheh on an Ancient North Arabian–Nabataean bilingual inscription. Al-Khraysheh (1994) considered the ANA text as Safaitic and provided the following transliteration and translation for both versions:

- ANA text: *l qdmt bn km d-ʿl s²ʿm w-rʿy ʿbʿr*: “by Qudāmat the son of Kaumu of the clan *S2ʿm*; and he grazed by the wells (of Bāyir)”.
- Nabataean text: *l qdmt br kwmw w-rs^ʿ*: “by Qudāmat the son of Kaumu of the clan *S2ʿm*; and he grazed by the wells (of Bāyir)”.

The second contribution (= W.Bāyir-YU 2), published by Hayajneh, Abab-

neh, and Al-Khraysheh (2015), is of a three-line inscription. The first two lines are written in ANA characters², while the third is written in Canaanite script (FIG. 2). The authors gave the following transcription and translation of the concerned text:

- 1) *h mlkm w-kms^l w qws^l b km ʿwdn*
- 2) *h ʿs^lhy m mdwbt* (or *mdws^lt*)
- 3) [a Canaanite inscription: not readable]

Translation: “Oh Mlkm and Kms^l and Qws^l, we seek protection from you (for) the / these wells from seepage / leakage (or: destruction, spoilage)”.

The ductus used to execute this text is similar to the ANA (Thamudic B) inscriptions, which is not the tradition in Wādī Bāyir³. The Canaanite signs are also not clear enough to draw paleographical, and consequently chronological, conclusions. This text represents the first attestation of the three Transjordanian Iron Age gods of Ammon, Moab, and Edom in one and the same Semitic text.

Greek and Latin Graffiti

Besides the numerous Semitic texts, chiefly North Arabian, epigraphic research conducted by the late Fawwaz Al-Khraysheh, together with Jacqueline Gysens Calzini of the IsMEO in Rome, led to the discovery of two Greek and two Latin graffiti. Jacqueline Gysens Calzini published these first Greek and Latin texts in 1993. The Greek graffiti, simple anthroponyms whose reading is poorly established—apart

¹ The siglum W. Bāyir-YU stands for Wādī Bāyir–Yarmouk University and will be used for the ANA inscriptions that are collected during the archaeological and epigraphical surveys conducted by the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology as mentioned above.

² For an extensive and general introduction on ANA epigraphy, see Hayajneh 2011 and 2017.

³ The entire corpus of ANA inscriptions from Wādī Bāyir is currently under treatment at the Department of Epigraphy of Yarmouk University.

from “Loukios”—do not provide much information. However, the two Latin texts clearly name soldiers (Calzini Gysens 1993; reviewed in Sartre 1996).

Also in 1993, five short “Greek” texts—all of which have remained unpublished to this day—as well as another Greek text of fifteen lines, were found by the same team (Gysens Calzini and Al-Khraysheh 1995; Gysens Calzini and Ruffo 1995). Thanks to Fawwaz Al-Khraysheh, then General Director of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, the long text was studied by Pierre-Louis Gatier in 2004 and published in 2018 in the *Festschrift* offered to Michael Macdonald. This Greek inscription of fifteen lines lists soldiers of two different Roman regular troops: one is a cavalry regiment named *ala Gaetulorum*, and the other is a camel corps named *ala dromedariorum* (FIG. 3). These two auxiliary units are well known from graffiti carved on cliffs and rocks in the surroundings of the city of *Hegra* (Madā’in Ṣāliḥ in Saudi Arabia) in the 2nd century AD and the beginning of the

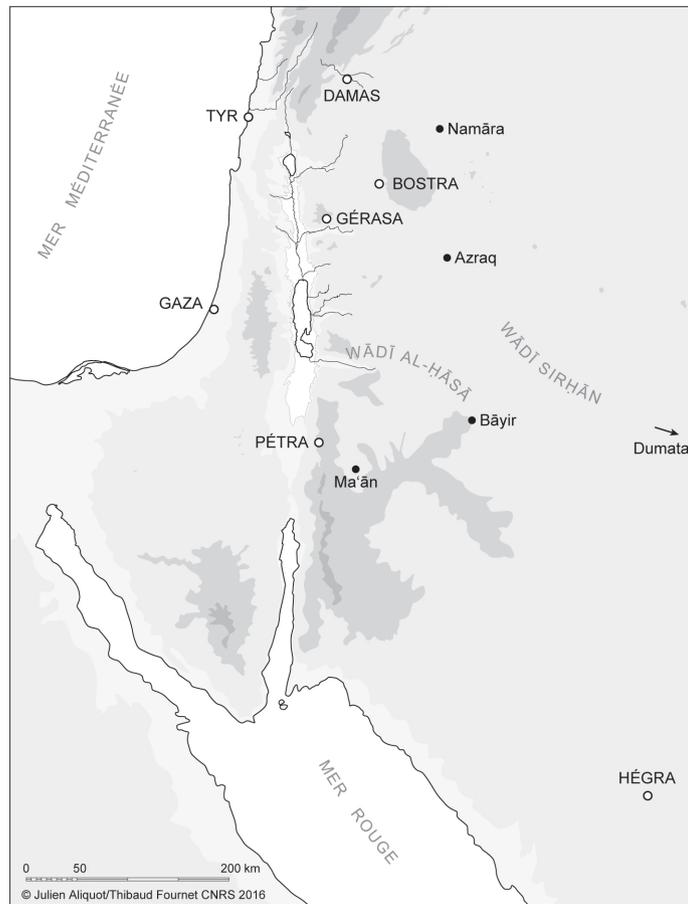
3rd century, but in Bāyir the text may date from the early 4th century AD. The troops were recruited from the region, and possibly from the Hauran, as the names of the soldiers suggest.

What about the five Greek graffiti that were allegedly found in 1993 and never published? In fact, no Greek text was identified in the recently reviewed Yarmouk University collection, but four Latin ones were: the two published by Calzini Gysens and two unpublished graffiti. They all will be published soon, or republished with corrections, but it is by now clear that, like all Latin texts from the desert and many from other places in *Provincia Arabia*, they refer to soldiers of the Roman army.

Conclusion

The important new information that the Bāyir graffiti reveal is the presence of Roman troops at the site, as a kind of desert patrol. Future research will tell whether this is a legacy of the Nabataean period and whether this presence was permanent or occasional.

NABATAEAN, ANCIENT NORTH ARABIAN, GREEK, AND LATIN INSCRIPTIONS



1. Map of Bāyir in its environment (image copyright J. Aliquot and Th. Fournet).



2. Bilingual ANA and Canaanite inscription (image copyright H. Hayajneh).



3. The long Greek inscription (image copyright Archives IGLS).

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