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A Nabataean Inscription near 'Avedat

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The corpus of surviving Nabataean inscriptions consists of thousands of graffiti written on rock faces and bedrock from Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Egypt, while a few such inscriptions are known from the Negev. The Nabataean inscription presented here was incised in the dark-brown patina of a limestone bedrock outcrop near 'Avedat, a region dotted with many petroglyphs and inscriptions. The inscription is written in a typical Nabataean signature-type formula, comprising the name of the author preceded by a blessing and ending with the general greeting of well-being. The isolated location of the inscription should probably be connected with the historic Nabataean trade route between Petra and Gaza.

Keywords: Nabataean, epigraphy, blessing, graffiti, Avedat, personal names, onomasticon

Introduction

The Nabataean inscription presented here was discovered c. 4.6 km south–southwest of 'Avedat, incised into the dark-brown patina of a limestone bedrock outcrop, near the pinnacle of a northward descending spur (map ref. 176788/518461; 645 m asl).[2] The spur was dotted by several clusters of limestone outcrops, covered with patina to varying extents, many bearing petroglyphs featuring a wide variety of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic images, typical of the surrounding region. It is noteworthy that a one-word Hismanic inscription was found nearby, and both may be broadly assigned to the same chronological and cultural context.[3] Several petroglyphs and inscriptions were documented on a neighboring spur to the west, including a Thamudic inscription and others in Arabic, the latter dated to the eighth–ninth centuries CE (Lender 1990: Site 103; Sharon 1990).

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[2] The inscription was discovered in February 2022 during research of agricultural systems of the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods in the 'Avedat area by Alexander Wiegmann.

[3] According to an interpretation of the one-word Hismanic inscription, it reads *w lbdm*: a personal name introduced by the conjunction *w*. We are grateful for the assistance of Prof. A. Al-Jallad of Ohio State University in the interpretation of this inscription.

Archaeological remains in the immediate vicinity of the inscription findspot include built channels for diverting run-off water downslope into wadis below the eastern and western slopes of the spur, toward agricultural systems from the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (Lender 1990:xxiii–xxv; Rubin 1990:181–184; Haiman 2012:44–49; Avni, Porat and Avni 2013). Remains of a rectangular-shaped tumulus (6.5 × 8.5 m, 0.5 m high) of unknown date were found approximately 115 m south of the inscription. No chronologically diagnostic finds were discovered in the vicinity.

The Inscription

This short Nabataean inscription comprises five incised words, arranged in two lines, the first line extending across the width of the bedrock, and the second indented to the left as a closing remark (Fig. 1). A crack through the rock bisects the inscription into three parts. Engraving marks identified on the interior of the fracture, located after the last letter of the inscriber's name *kšṭw* (see below), indicate that the crack had formed prior to the execution of the inscription. The text is well-preserved and allows for a mostly clear-cut reading, apart from one letter, a *tav*, appearing at the end of the first sentence. The inscription reads:

1 bryk kšṭw br khylt
2 šlm

Translation:

1 Blessed be *Kšṭw* son of *Khylt*.
2 Greetings!

The Script

The handwriting attests to a midium skill level, as the letters are not of uniform size and shape, the differences particularly noticeable between the first three words and the fourth one of Line 1; the last word in this line is much larger than the preceding three. Also, the spacing between the letters varies: at the beginning of Line 1, the spaces are fairly even, gradually increasing toward the end, perhaps since the author realized that he had enough space to complete the text. It appears that the author did not distinguish between medial and final forms of certain letters, as far as can be deduced from the small variety of letters appearing in the text (n = 11). An example of this is the use of the medial form of the letter *kaf* at the end of *bryk*, and possibly also the manner in which the letter *bet* is employed. The individual letters are mostly separated, and the script is not cursive, apart from the sequence *br*. Based on palaeographical grounds, the inscription probably dates to the first century CE (see below).

Bet (*b*). The medial *bet* was executed in three successive movements: the roof begins with a vertical serif; the right downstroke descends almost vertically and joins the base in a curved angle; and the base, either extended horizontally or concave in form, is ligatured to the following *resh*, as expected. It is noteworthy that the medial *bet* in developed Nabataean

scripts lacks the roof with a serif, especially in the sequence *br*, “son (of)” (Yardeni 2000:238–239).

He (*h*). The *he* is shaped as a large square without a base or a sting at the upper right corner. The left downstroke descends directly from the left half of the roof and parallels the

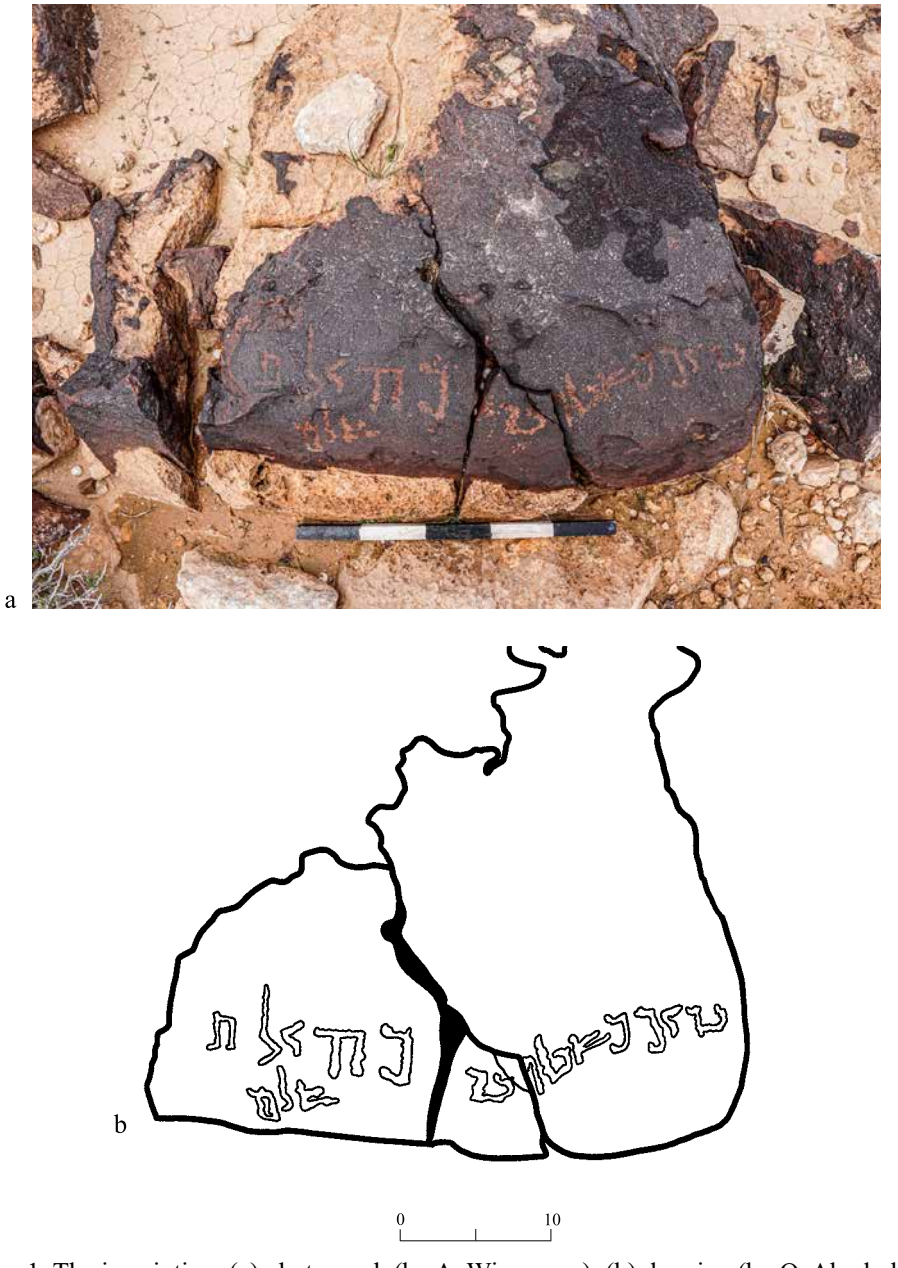

Fig. 1. The inscription: (a) photograph (by A. Wiegmann); (b) drawing (by O. Abudraham).

right downstroke. The vertical position of the medial *he* has parallels in some of the early Nabataean inscriptions (e.g., the Aṣlaḥ and the El-Kutba inscriptions; Yardeni 2000:223, 243).

Waw (*w*). As far as we can tell, the *waw* appears in its early form. The loop at its top is open and the downstroke slants slightly to the right (Yardeni 2000:244).

Ṭet (*ṭ*). The *ṭet* is open. The left stroke starts high above the line and meets the right curved stroke in a sharp angle. The short upper stroke is almost horizontal rather than diagonal.

Yod (*y*). The *yod* is peculiar, appearing as a left-pointing angle with only a minor extension in its lower part. Similar forms of the letter are attested in an early Nabataean incantation text on a pebble from Ḥorbat Raqiq, about 10 km northwest of Be'er Sheva' (Naveh 1979b:115; Yardeni 2000:228, 248).

Kaf (*k*). There is no discernible distinction between the medial and final *kaf*. The relatively wide concave roof has a short vertical serif. The base of the letter is concave in two of its occurrences; in its third occurrence, it slants up to the left.

Lamed (*l*). The *lamed* has a long, vertically descending mast; the roof and the tail are narrow, creating a right pointing angle (cf. the Aṣlaḥ inscription from Petra; Yardeni 2000:223, 251).

Mem (*m*). The final *mem* has a closed rectangular shape with a notable serif at the left end; the roof and left stroke cross each other.

Resh (*r*). The *resh* is relatively small and simple.

Shin (*š*). The letter *shin* appears twice in the inscription, and in both occurrences the left diagonal stroke is rather short and extends only a little below the meeting point with the lower right stroke. There is no indication of curving to the left at the bottom of the *shin*.

Commentary

bryk. This word, meaning 'blessed', is in the passive participle G-stem, used as a masculine singular adjective.

kšṭw. Three personal names deriving from the historical root *q-š-t* (<*q-š+t* [feminine ending]) were recorded so far in the Nabataean onomasticon: *qšṭw*, *kšṭw* and *kšyṭw*. From a linguistic point of view, the alternative spellings represent different phases in a prolonged process of phonetic changes, known in various dialects of Aramaic: *qšt* > *qšṭ* (assimilation of a non-emphatic to an emphatic consonant) > *kšṭ* (dissimilation of an emphatic consonant in the presence of another). The latest phase in this process is well attested in Syriac (e.g.,

𐢀𐢘𐢡𐢕 ‘bowman’, 𐢡“𐢘 “to shoot with a bow”), as well as in the onomasticon of Hatra (Marcato 2018:74).

The common Nabataean form *qšṭw*, ‘archer’, ‘bowman’, is attested in more than a dozen inscriptions form the Sinai Peninsula (Negev 1991:59), while the form *kšṭw* is known in a signature-type inscription form Darb al-Bakrah (Nehmé 2018:124), and possibly also from an inscription from Petra (cf. Nehmé 2003:222, No. 185.1). The third spelling, *kšyṭw*, appears in a graffito near the hilltop of ‘Aevdat (Lagrange 1904:293; Lidzbarski 1908:264). As indicated by the infixed *yod*, the last name is formed in the Arabic diminutive pattern *qutayl* ‘little archer,’ ‘little bowman’ (for transcriptions of the name in Greek, Κασετος, Χασετος, Χασεθος, and Latin, *Chasetus*, see Bader and Habash 2005:196, and references therein).

khylt. While a reading of this word with *mem* as the final letter instead of *tav* is possible (i.e., *khylm*), this seems less plausible from a paleographical standpoint, as the left stroke apparently curves to the left. Although the exact form of this anthroponym is unknown from other sources, the root *k-h-l* (Aramaic “to be able” or Arabic, “mature age”) is known to have been used in several personal names in Nabataean and Palmyrene, such as *khylw* (Stark 1971:28, 92; Negev 1991:35) and *khln* (Negev 1991:35; for a detailed discussion of the possible meanings of these names and the Qatabanic form *khlm*, see Al-Theeb 2011:354).

šlm. As in numerous Nabataean graffito inscriptions, this short text ends with the direct exclamation ‘peace/wellbeing,’ granted to the inscriber.

Discussion

The corpus of surviving Nabataean inscriptions consists of thousands of graffiti written on rock faces and bedrock from Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Egypt, while a few such inscriptions are known from the Negev. The inscriptions are characterized by several laconic patterns, originally derived from an elaborate Aramaic dedication formula in which the inscriber asks to be commemorated in the presence of a particular god (Naveh 1979a; Healey 1996:178–181). The most conventional blessing formulae are *dkyr*, “may he be remembered”; *bryk*, “may he be blessed”; and *šlm*, “may he be safe” (Macdonald 2003:40; Nehmé 2018:31). The present inscription follows one of the basic Nabataean signature-type formulae, comprising the name of the author preceded by the passive participle *bryk* and ending with the general greeting *šlm*. The author’s name, *kšṭw*, is known from other Nabataean texts, while the anthroponym, *khylt*, was heretofore unknown, representing a new addition to the Nabataean onomasticon.

The apparently isolated location of the present inscription near ‘Avedat calls for an explanation. ‘Avedat was located on the historic Nabataean trade route between Petra and Gaza (the final western segment of the Incense Road), approaching the town roughly from the southeast (Erickson-Gini and Israel 2013:25–29). Although no remains of an ancient

road were found in the immediate vicinity of the inscription, the spur where it was found and the surrounding wadis are easily passable by foot and may have been traversed by subsidiary routes leading to ‘Avedat from the south.

Two other Nabataean inscriptions were found in the agricultural hinterland of ‘Avedat, to its south and southwest, the nearest being c. 2 km to the south of the inscription discussed here (Lender 1990:xviii, 30, 105; Sites 61, 227). These are short inscriptions bearing personal names, similarly incised in the dark-brown patina of the limestone bedrock, with no clear association to any built structure or settlement. The inscriptions were probably created by Nabataean travelers, who resided in ephemeral camp sites along the trade route. Other Nabataean inscriptions, incised on portable limestone slabs and incorporated in buildings, were found in the vicinity of ‘En ‘Avedat and on the ‘Avedat acropolis (Negev 1961; 1963; 1986; 2003; Naveh 1967).

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