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A New Dedicatory Nabataean Inscription Dated to AD 53

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A New Dedicatory Nabataean Inscription Dated to AD 53

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Abstract

This paper presents a new Nabataean inscription dedicated to the Nabataean chief god Dushara and dated to the thirteenth year of the reign of the Nabataean king Malichus II (AD 40–70). It mentions the dedication of 'ly', a cultic feature rarely attested in Nabataean.

Keywords: Nabataean inscriptions, cultic practice, Dushara

1 Introduction

The photograph of the text that is discussed here was sent to me for identification by a person who claimed that he saw it in Petra. Despite repeated attempts to visit the site where the text was seen, it has not been possible to find it. The author was able to study the text depending merely on the available photographs.

The inscription is of the dedicatory type. Dedicatory inscriptions are attested on Nabataean architectural remains including temples, altars and other cultic features and they record dedications made by individuals and corporate groups to deities and rulers. A considerable number of dedications were made to Dushara (Healey 2001: 86, 105; Zayadine 2003: 59) who is normally linked with the royal family (Dijkstra 1995: 313). Dedications offered to this god were referred to in several Nabataean texts found in the Negev (Negev 1963: 113–117), Arabia (Savignac & Starcky 1957), the Hauran (Healey 2001: 98), Petra (CIS II, 443), Miletus (Cantineau 1930–1932: 46), and even as far away as Italy (CIS II, 158) and southern Arabia (Nebes 2006). Nabataean marble bases for statues have been found also in Pozzuoli in addition to many Latin inscribed fragments that mention *DVSARI SACRVM*, meaning “sacred to Dushara”, dated probably to the end of the first century BC and the beginning of the first century AD (Schmid 2004: 420–421).

Several Nabataean temples were built for the worshipping of Dushara and these include the temple of Qasr al-Bint (Zayadine 1986: 243, 245). An important example of the Petraean dedications made to this god is found in the Turkmāniyyeh tomb inscription from Petra which refers to dedications of properties to Dushara. The text states:

... and all the rest of the property which is in these places are sacred and dedicated to Dushara, the god of our lord, and his sacred throne

and all the gods, (as) in the documents of consecration according to their contents. (Healey 1993: 238)

The stone was incised with straight lines, probably by the engraver. These incisions indicate that the engraver made mistakes that he corrected by re-wrote some letters again (see figure 1), indicating that the engraver may not have prepared fully for his work.

2 The text

The text consists of three lines engraved on a broken piece of well-cut and smoothed sandstone (20 cm by 5 cm). The letters are irregular in size but with identical spacing. They can be clearly read except on the right-hand side which has been defaced and the beginning of the second and third lines which are missing. The form of the letters resemble texts that have been dated to the reign of Malichus II and Rabbel II.

Figure 1: Photograph of the inscription



Figure 2: Drawing of the inscription (drawn by Z. al-Salameen). Grey indicates breaks in the stone and blue shows the scratches that represent writing mistakes made by the writer.



2.1 Transliteration

The text reads as follows:

d[nh] ʿlyʿ dy qrb brʿtʿ ldwšrʿ dy
.....šnt ʿšr wlt lmlkw mlkʿ
...l hyy npšh wbrth

2.2 Translation

Th[is is] the high place / platform which brʿtʿ dedicated to Dushara who...
 ...the year 13 of (the rule of) Malichus the king
 ...for his own life and his daughter

2.3 Commentary

d[nh]: “this” (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 333ff). The second and parts of the third letters are not clearly visible but our reconstruction of this word, which is common in Nabataean, is almost certain.

ʿlyʿ: Nehmé has already published a Nabataean text with *ʿlyʿ*. This is an inscription from Mṣayfra in Hauran dedicated to Baalshamin and dated to the reign of Rabbel II (Nehmé 2010: n. 3). The text mentions *šrkw ʿlyʿ* which has been translated as “le participant/associé de la hauteur (du haut lieu ?)”. The exact meaning of this word in this text does not correspond to the meaning of *ʿlyʿ* which is attested in the text that is being dealt with here.

The word appears in Aramaic with the meaning “height, that which is situated on high” (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 843). Words derived from the root ʿ are attested in Nabataean inscriptions and they are found in texts referring to cultic dedications that represent “high features”. The word ʿyt “the high” is attested in a Nabataean inscription from Hauran (CIS II, 164). It may be compared with the word ʿwt “the altars” that is attested in a text engraved on an altar found in Hauran and mentions a dedication made to the god Baalshamin (Healey 2009: 207).

dy: the well-known relative pronoun meaning “which, that”.

qrb: This is the standard verb used in Nabataean to dedicate objects to gods and goddesses, “to offer, dedicate”. It occurs frequently in Nabataean Aramaic, Hebrew, Palmyrene and Hatraean (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 1029).

brʿt: This is the name of the dedicator. The name appears in the form of brʿtw, in Nabataean texts found in Sinai (Negev 1991: 17), but has not previously appeared in Nabataean in its current form. This compound name consists of br “son of” and ʿt which is derived from the Arabic root ʿt that means “to importune, tease” (Harding 1971: 404). The name is attested in Palmyrene (Stark 1971: 12) and North Arabian inscriptions (Harding 1971: 120).

ldwšr: “to/for Dushara”. Dushara was the major Nabataean deity. His name, which means “the one of the Shara mountains”, is mentioned frequently in Nabataean and North Arabian inscriptions, and was given several epithets in the Nabataean inscriptions, including “Lord of the House (i.e. temple), “Lord of heaven and earth”, “God of our Lord (the king)” and “the one who separates night from day” (Zayadine 2003: 59).

šnt šr wlt: “year thirteen” of the rule of Malichus II (AD 40–70), which corresponds to AD 53.

lmlkw mlk: “to Malichus the king”. There were two Nabataean kings who are known to have borne this name: Malichus I (59–30 BC) and Malichus II (AD 40–70). The forms of the letters indicate that it should be dated to the Malichus II who ascended the throne in AD 40. He was the son of Aretas IV (9 BC–AD 40) as mentioned in Nabataean inscriptions.

Our understanding of the Nabataean history during Malichus II’s reign is not clear and the only historical reference that mentions Malichus II is Josephus. He talks about the Jewish war against the Romans that took place in AD 67 and mentions that Malichus sent 1000 cavalry and 5000 infantry to support the Romans (*War* III, 68).

ʿl hyy: “for the life of”. This formula is common in Nabataean, Palmyrene, Edessan and Hatraean dedicatory inscriptions of the first three centuries AD (Healey 2001: 178–180; 2009: 53). Healey concluded that the inscriptions that include this formula are mostly expressions of political loyalty (2001: 178). Dijkstra says that the employment of ʿl hyy “suggests that whoever reads the text is invited to pay his respect to the Nabataean royal family. In arguing such an attitude on this part of the reader, the dedicator shows his allegiance to his legitimate overlords” (1995: 65). Anderson (2005: 124) considers that this phrase “which seems to be an honorific akin to the Greek euergetic terms τιμῆς χάριν and τιμῆς ἕνεκεν, commemorates the dedicator’s allegiance to the honored”.

There are few ʿl hyy Nabataean inscriptions with beneficiaries other than royalty and those include an inscription that contains the formula ʿl hyyh nṣṣh “for the life of himself” (Milik 1958: 247). One dedicatory text from Taymāʿ

alludes to a dedication to Manāt ʿl hyy “for the life of his soul and the soul of his offspring in eternity” (Dijkstra 1995: 74).

npš-h: “self”, with 3rd masculine singular pronoun.

w brt-h: “and his daughter”, with 3rd masculine singular pronoun.

3 Nabataean dedications: Discussion

There are only two historical sources that provide us with limited information on Nabataean offerings and dedications. The first is Strabo who said that the Nabataeans worshipped the sun and they used to burn frankincense in their cultic rituals (Strabo XVI.4.26). This has been confirmed by the discovery of incense burners the remains of burnt frankincense (Hammond 1996: 132–133; Farajat & Nawafleh 2005: 381).

The second historical source that alludes to similar practices is the Byzantine lexicon the Suda, which refers to pouring out the blood of sacrificial animals as a libation (online at <http://www.stoa.org/sol>). The offering of sacrificial animals while practicing certain cults has been confirmed archaeologically and Nabataean discoveries in Sinai have confirmed that some animals were sacrificed within the temple complex (Struder 2007: 267). In addition, the relief found near al-Deir, which represents two camels being led to a betyl by worshippers, indicates this practice (Dalman 1908: 276). The discovery of terracotta figurines representing animals may be linked with sacrificial activities (El-Khoury 2002).

Our main source of information on Nabataean offerings and dedications is epigraphy. The Winged Lion inscription mentions that payments made to the temple as offerings, and these normally consisted of silver or gold, or currency either bronze or silver (Hammond et al. 1986).

Many Nabataean inscriptions provide us with a series of religious constructions and cultic dedications made or financed by ordinary citizens such as: *šlm*ʿ and *šlmt*ʿ “statue” (Cantineau 1930–1932: 6; Littmann 1914: 103), *ps[ylw]* “sculpture”? (Littmann 1914: 18), *msgd*ʿ “cult-stone, a cult-niche with a betyl, altar” (Littmann 1914: 24; Healey 2001: 78), *hmn*ʿ “fire-altar” or “temple” (Littmann 1914: 27; Healey 2001: 78), *bnyn*ʿ “building” (Littmann 1914: 28), *byt*ʿ, *byrt*ʿ and *mhrmt*ʿ “temple” (CIS II, 182; Littmann 1914: 100; Savignac & Starcky 1957), *rbʿt*ʿ and *rbʿn*ʿ “cella, rectangular sanctuary” (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 1058), *qsr* “cella, camp” (Healey 2001: 78), *rkt*ʿ “pillar or portico” (Healey 2001: 78), *mwtb*ʿ “part of an altar” (Healey 2001: 79), *mšb*ʿ “image in bas-relief” (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 675), *mgmr dhn*ʿ and *wkpt kyš*ʿ “the oil-burner (or oil-burning lamp?) and the summer vessel (?)” (Al-Salameen & Falahat 2014), *mnr* and *mnr*ʿ “lamp” (Al-Salameen 2014, Al-Salameen & Shdaifat 2014).

Names of dedications derived from the roots ʿl and ʿlh are attested in Nabataean. These include *lwt*ʿ “the altars” and *lyt*ʿ “the high” that are attested in Nabataean dedications found in Hauran (Healey 2009: 207; CIS II, 164). The feature that is mentioned in our current text is *ly*ʿ which seems to be a form of altars to which this stone fragment was seemingly fixed. This word is parallel to the Canaanite and Hebrew *bāmā* which was used to mean raised platform or high place (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 167; Gesenius 1844: 119). This word occurs many times in the Hebrew Bible and was used to describe a raised

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construction, which is similar, in terms of its linguistic meaning to *ly'* “high, rising ground or platform” that occurs in our current inscription.

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Sigla

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