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# A Paleo-Arabic inscription on a route north of Ṭā'if

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## Abstract

This paper will produce a new edition of the Rī' al-Zallālah inscription, discussing in detail its paleographic features and content, and the ramifications it has on our understanding of the linguistic and religious milieu of the sixth–early seventh century Ḥigāz.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Rī' al-Zallālah is a narrow pass on a path connecting Ṭā'if to a large wādī to its north called al-Sayl al-Kabīr from which it is possible to travel southwest to Mecca, avoiding the mountainous barrier separating the two towns further south, or to the towns northeast, connecting it to *darb al-zubaydah*, the traditional Ḥajj route for pilgrims coming from 'Irāq (see Figure 5). The site is mentioned in Islamic sources.<sup>1</sup> The first Western explorer to visit the area was James Hamilton in 1845, who described a large panel of rock art on a boulder on the side of the pass.<sup>2</sup> Doughty was the first to copy the scene, which included a carving of a large seated man with a staff along with the three columns of Thamudic texts. He described the presence of “four or five more Kufic inscriptions” in the passage, but these were not included in his publication.<sup>3</sup> His drawing of the panel is rather inaccurate when compared to what appears on the rock. And, more importantly, he neglected an early Arabic inscription to the right of the Thamudic columns.

The first scholar to notice the Arabic inscription on this panel was A. Grohmann in his edition of Arabic texts collected on the Philby-Ryckmans-Lippens expedition to Arabia in 1951–1952. The team photographed the large rock copied by Doughty and Philby but did not produce a copy of

the Arabic inscription it contained (see Fig. 1). Grohmann therefore read the text—labelled Z 2—from the black and white photograph alone, which was focused on the seated man and the Thamudic columns. Nevertheless, Grohmann was able to supply a reading and tentatively date the inscription to the first or second century AH, although his criteria for doing so is not made clear.

## Grohmann's reading:

يرحم ربنا	1.
قرة	2.
بن سيد	3.

1.	<i>May our Lord have mercy upon</i>
2.	<i>Qurrah</i>
3.	<i>ibn Sayyid</i>

A partial photograph of the panel was again published in *Atlat* 18 (pl. 6.13).<sup>4</sup> In August 2021, the Ṭā'if-Mecca epigraphic survey project, led by Ahmad Al-Jallad and Hythem Sidky, returned to the site to produce new, high-quality photographs of the panel.<sup>5</sup> It became clear that the inscription as read by Grohmann was incomplete. The angle of the 1951 photograph cut off part of line two and obscured many important features of the letter shapes.

<sup>1</sup>It is referred to as 'Aqabat al-Zallālah; see Al-Aṣṣfahānī, 1968: 28.

<sup>2</sup>Grohmann, 1962: 3.

<sup>3</sup>Doughty, 1921: 528–529.

<sup>4</sup>Al-Salouk et al., 2005.

<sup>5</sup>This project is sponsored by the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. Other members of the field team were Khālid al-Mālikī of the Ṭā'if office of Antiquities and Mohammad Al-'Otaybi of the KFRCIS.

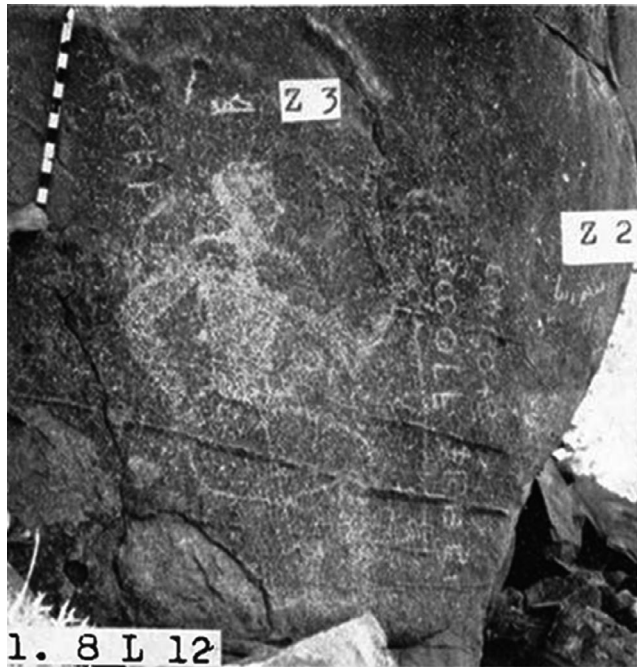


FIGURE 1 Photograph of the Rī' al-Zallālah panel from the Philby-Ryckmans-Lippens expedition, published in Grohmann, 1962: 117

The new photographs confirm that the text rather belongs to the Paleo-Arabic category, a term that refers to the body of Arabic-script inscriptions produced in the pre-Islamic period, beginning in the late fifth century CE (see below).

This paper will produce a new edition of the Rī' al-Zallālah inscription, discussing in detail its paleographic features and content, and the ramifications it has for our understanding of the linguistic and religious milieu of the sixth–early seventh century Ḥigāz.

## 1.1 | Terminological preliminaries

The Arabic script of the early Islamic period reflects a continuous development from the Nabataean Aramaic script during the first half of the first millennium CE, concentrated in the northern Ḥigāz.<sup>6</sup> Between the third and fifth centuries CE, the Nabataean script entered a phase described as “Nabataeo-Arabic” by L. Nehmé, which is characterised by letter shapes that are intermediate between the Classical Nabataean script and the Arabic script as it is known from the early Islamic period.<sup>7</sup> The earliest dated inscriptions with a full repertoire of letter shapes that can be described as “Arabic” appear in the late fifth century CE in the area of Ḥimā north of Nagrān, although the vast majority of texts belonging to this category in other parts of the Peninsula do not carry an absolute date.<sup>8</sup> The Arabic-script inscriptions of the fifth

and sixth centuries CE do not reflect a single, homogeneous writing tradition but rather exhibit considerable variation in letter shapes, formulaic expressions and orthography.<sup>9</sup> This bundle of features contrasts it with the majority of Arabic texts produced in the early Islamic period, which suggests the emergence of a bottleneck associated with the rise of the Islamic polity.

The corpus of pre-Islamic Arabic-script inscriptions is relatively small compared to the other epigraphic categories of ancient Arabia, yet continues to grow in the wake of the exploration of the Arabian Peninsula. Scholars have traditionally employed several terms to describe this corpus, including “Old Arabic”, “Pre-Islamic Arabic”, and “sixth century Pre-Islamic Arabic”. Each of these terms, however, comes with its shortcomings. Old Arabic is at the same time used for the body of Arabic language inscriptions, written in any script, produced in the pre-Islamic period and therefore cannot refer precisely to texts carved in the fully developed Arabic script.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Pre-Islamic Arabic and sixth century Arabic anchor this palaeographic phase to an ill-defined point in time: the beginning of Islam. It, moreover, seems unlikely that the political activities of Mohammed and the eventual standardisation of the script associated with the rise of the Medinan state would have spread uniformly across Arabia and eliminated in one stroke all earlier writing traditions of Arabic. Indeed, isolated examples of earlier phases of Arabic continue past the death of Mohammed in 632 CE.<sup>11</sup>

In their 2014 edition of the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions from Ḥimā, Robin, al-Ghabban and al-Said introduced a new term to refer to the body of Arabic-script inscriptions from pre-Islamic times: Paleo-Arabic.<sup>12</sup> In our opinion, this term is superior to chronologically anchored labels as it refers to a cluster of letter shapes, orthographic practices and linguistic peculiarities that are distinct from the standardised idiom of Islamic times, and does not suggest a linear evolutionary relationship between both phases. It, moreover, allows for the possibility of Paleo-Arabic writing traditions to continue marginally beyond the appearance of the standardised Islamic-Arabic writing school, and permits one to speak of “Paleo-Arabic” relics in Islamic period texts, such as *wawation* or the dented final *hē*, without anachronistically referring to such features as pre-Islamic.

## 2 | THE RĪ' AL-ZALLĀLAH PALEO-ARABIC INSCRIPTION (Figs. 2 and 3)

### 2.1 | Reading

بركم رينا  
انا ره

<sup>9</sup>See Al-Jallad, 2018a and 2021c on these features.

<sup>10</sup>For the traditional epigraphic definition of “Old Arabic”, see Macdonald, 2008; see Al-Jallad, 2018b on Old Arabic in the context of North Arabia’s other languages and writing traditions.

<sup>11</sup>On these examples, see Al-Jallad, 2021c.

<sup>12</sup>Robin et al., 2014: 1039.

<sup>6</sup>Macdonald, 2003; Nehmé, 2010.

<sup>7</sup>Nehmé, 2010: 48–54.

<sup>8</sup>This is Ḥimā-Sud PalAr 1, dated to the year 470 CE, published in Robin et al., 2014: 1087–1092.



FIGURE 2 Rī' al-Zallālah Paleo-Arabic inscription

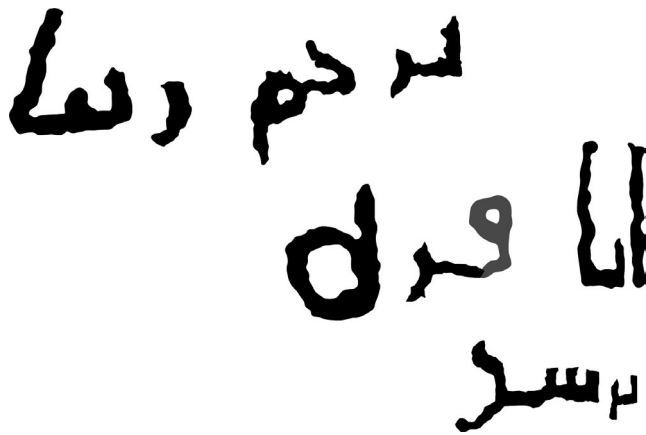


FIGURE 3 Tracing of the Rī' al-Zallālah Paleo-Arabic inscription

در سد  
*brk-[k]m rb-n'*  
*'n' .rh*  
*br sd*

## 2.2 | Palaeographic discussion

### Line 1: *brk-[k]m rb-n'*



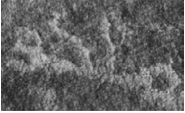
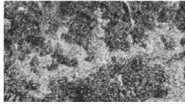
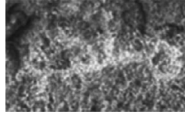

*brkm*: This shape of the *rē* is common in the Paleo-Arabic corpus, finding its closest parallels in the texts from Ḥimā (see Table 1). It is characterised by a virtually vertical back slightly shorter above the baseline with a small curve on the end that extends below the baseline. In texts bearing this shape, the lunate form, characteristic of early Islamic Arabic, had already emerged and seems to be an alloglyph used interchangeably, see Ḥimā Sud palAr 8.

*brkm*: This letter has experienced more significant weathering than the two that came before it, but its reading as such is assured by the small uptick on the superior bar. The letter could be confused with a later *ḥ* but the glyph in this stage of

TABLE 1 A comparison of the *rē* in the Rī' al-Zallālah inscription and the Paleo-Arabic texts of Ḥimā



Rī' al-Zallālah - Line 1, glyph 2	Rī' al-Zallālah - Line 1, glyph 5	Himā Sud palAr 6	Himā Sud palAr 8	Himā Sud palAr 9	Himā Sud palAr 10
بركم	ر.م	بر	بر مرالقس	ر.م	ر.م

TABLE 2 The *k* in the Paleo-Arabic inscriptions of Ḥimā as compared to word 1 in the Rīʿ al-Zallālah inscription

Rīʿ al-Zallālah	Ḥimā PalAr 5	Ḥimā PalAr 6	Ḥimā PalAr 7	Ḥimā PalAr 7	FaS 5a
					
نركم	ملكو	ملكو	ملكو	ملكو	كعدو

Jebel Usays	Dūmat al-Jandal inscription	Yazīd inscription
		
الملك	دكر	دكر

TABLE 3 Shape of the “calligraphic” Paleo-Arabic *kāf*TABLE 4 Final *mīm* in two Paleo-Arabic inscriptions, Jebel Usays and Ḥarrān

Jebel Usays inscription	Ḥarrān inscription
	
رقدم	نعم

the script usually forms a 45-degree angle with the intersecting stroke extending considerably below the baseline.<sup>13</sup>

The compact *kāf* is a characteristic feature of the texts from Ḥimā and several unpublished inscriptions from the Northern Ḥigāz documented by the *Farīq al-Ṣaḥrāʾ* (see Table 2).<sup>14</sup> It contrasts with the more calligraphic form of the glyph attested in the Dūmat al-Jandal Paleo-Arabic, the Jebel Usays inscription, and in the Yazīd Inscription, all of which contain a very exaggerated upward stroke (see Table 3).

**brkm:** The final *mīm* appears to have an anachronistic shape with a downward tail. Indeed, most Paleo-Arabic texts form the final *mīm* with a straight line extending to the left on the baseline, similar to the early Islamic hand.<sup>15</sup> This shape is encountered in the Jebel Usays inscription and the Ḥarrān inscription (see Table 4).

While it may be the case that the downward stroke in the present inscription was an idiosyncrasy of our author's hand, the presence of an identical letter shape in an inscription discovered by *Farīq al-Ṣaḥrāʾ* between Tabūk and al-Ḥigr and

published online suggests that the form was an established alternative in the Paleo-Arabic period (see Table 5).<sup>16</sup> The text contains the phrase سلم انتم “may you be at peace”, which is attested a number of times in the Paleo-Arabic inscriptions from this region.<sup>17</sup> Both of the final *mīms* have vertical tails. The shape attested in FaS 5b and the Rīʿ al-Zallālah inscription is distinguished from the later Islamic-period downward-tailed *mīm* in that its tail extends directly from the loop rather than from a line extending to the left first on the baseline.

**rb-nʾ:** The reading of this word is clear, with the exception of the final *alif*, which appears to have experienced more weathering than the rest of the text. The photograph published in Grohmann 1962—taken in 1951—removes any doubt from this reading.

#### Line 2: ʾnʾ {q}rh

**ʾnʾ:** The first *alif* lacks the rightward tail characteristic of Ḥigāzī and Kūfī hands of the seventh century but is consistent with the Paleo-Arabic shape—a straight line sometimes leaning slightly to the right but often completely vertical.<sup>18</sup> The straight *alif* is also encountered in early papyri and in the Zuhayr inscription, suggesting that it survived as a common letter shape into the early Islamic period until the tailed *alif* of the calligraphic Ḥigāzī hand began to dominate in inscriptions as well (see Table 6).

**{q}rh:** The *rē* has a nearly identical shape to its two occurrences above. The final independent *hē* has the form of a circle with an upward protruding denticle on the right side.<sup>19</sup> It is perhaps significant that this letter shape is encountered

<sup>13</sup>This letter shape had already emerged in the Nabataeo-Arabic period (see Nehmé, 2010: 49) and is attested in several Paleo-Arabic texts; see below.

<sup>14</sup>*Farīq al-Ṣaḥrāʾ*, or “the desert team”, is a group of amateur Saudi travellers and researchers who manage the website [alsahra.org](http://alsahra.org), where they post reports of their surveys and photographs of inscriptions and archaeological sites, many of which are new to science.

<sup>15</sup>This shape was already achieved in the Nabataeo-Arabic phase; see Nehmé, 2010: 50.

<sup>16</sup><https://i1.wp.com/alsahra.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/16.jpg>.

<sup>17</sup>This phrase also makes an appearance in Islamic sources in letters sent by the prophet; see Ibn Saʿd, 1990: 1: 210, 212, 216.

<sup>18</sup>The rightward leaning straight line emerged in the Nabataeo-Arabic phase; see Nehmé, 2010: 49. On the re-emergence of the tailed *alif* in Islamic-period Arabic, see Al-Jallad, 2018a: 204–205.

<sup>19</sup>This shape is an attested variant in the Nabataeo-Arabic phase; see Nehmé, 2010: 49.

TABLE 5 Comparison of final *mīm*

Rī' al-Zallālah	FaS 5b
	
مركم	سليم اندم

TABLE 6 The independent tailless *alif*

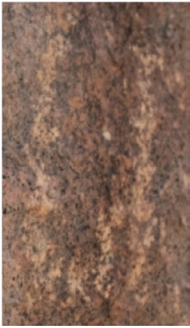




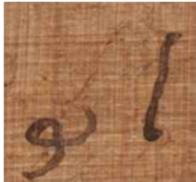


Rī' al-Zallālah	FaS 3	Jebel Usays	Ḥarrān	Zuhayr Inscription	Perf 558
					
انا	انا	انه	انا	انا	انو

TABLE 7 The independent *hē*

Rī' az-Zallālah	FaS 5b
	
ه.	القوه

in FaS 5b, which shares with the Rī' al-Zallālah text the downward-tailed *mīm* (see Table 7). The clustering of these letter shapes may suggest that the authors of both texts share a similar scribal background, perhaps indicating that they were composed relatively closely in time.

The first letter is too weathered to read on the rock itself. Grohmann took it as a *qāf* and read the name as *قره*; indeed, the photograph published in 1962 and the one published in *Atlat* 18 suggest the presence of a loop at the beginning of the word, although it has a different patina from the remaining letters. It therefore remains unclear if this is simply an optical illusion produced by the angle of the photo or if it does reflect the remnants of a letter shape. The tracing in grey attempts to reproduce Grohmann's reading.

Based on the rock itself, almost any letter could be supplied in the space and so its identification with certainty is impossible. One may consider two further possibilities:

the first is *mrh* /murrah/, which is attested in Ancient North Arabian inscriptions<sup>20</sup> and is found at least once in Nabataean as *mrt*.<sup>21</sup> This would correspond to the Arabic name *murrah*, which is common in Islamic times and continues to be in use today. The obliterated letter could also be a *h*, giving *hurrah*, attested as *hrt* some 84 times in the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions.<sup>22</sup> The name may possibly be attested in Nabataean as *hrtw*, but one cannot rule out the possibility that this is a rare attestation of the name *ḥārīt*.<sup>23</sup> Numerous other names are naturally possible but

<sup>20</sup>Attested 37 times in the OCIANA corpus (consulted 17/8/21).

<sup>21</sup>JSNab 23; Negev, 1991: s.v.

<sup>22</sup>OCIANA corpus (consulted 17/8/21).

<sup>23</sup>Negev, 1991: s.v. The presence of *wawation* may further support this identification as it does not appear on names ending in the feminine *-at* (diptotes).



FIGURE 4 The *br* Aramaeogram in the Rī' al-Zallālah inscription outlined in black. Damage beneath the glyph outlined in red

these two would appear to us to be the most likely candidates due to their attestation in Ancient North Arabian, Nabataean and Islamic Arabic sources. Finally, from a certain angle, it is possible to see a *g*, producing the name جره, which is attested in Safaitic seven times as *grt*.<sup>24</sup>

#### Line3: *br sd*

*br*: The Aramaeogram *br* is the only form employed for “son” in the genealogies of the Paleo-Arabic inscriptions. The shape of the *rē* in this word already appears to be distinct from the *rē*'s other occurrences in the inscription, lacking the curve beneath the baseline, a phenomenon that continues into the early Islamic period.<sup>25</sup> There is some damage under the downward stroke of the *rē* (outlined in red in Figure 4), but it should not be mistaken as part of the glyph; it does not form a continuous line.

The distinct shape of the *rē* in the *br*-gram may suggest that it was already frozen as an Aramaeogram. Once the *rē* began to acquire a more lunate shape, the letter as part of the word for “son of” remained unaffected for some time as writers no longer parsed it as *b-r*. The same phenomenon is encountered in FaS 5b, where the *br*-gram has a straight and short *rē* while outside of this context it takes a lunate shape (see Table 8).

<sup>24</sup>This is according to the OCIANA corpus (consulted 26/9/21). We thank L. Nehmé for this suggestion.

<sup>25</sup>Sijpesteijn, 2020.

TABLE 8 A comparison of the *rē* in the *Br*-gram and other contexts

FaS 5b : <i>br</i> -gram	FaS 5b : <i>'l-ḥzrg</i>
	
بر	الحررح

This development, however, cannot be treated in absolute terms. There are other Paleo-Arabic inscriptions in which the *rē* of *br* and the letter in other contexts maintain an identical shape.<sup>26</sup>

*s/šd/d*: The identification of this name is also unclear. The roots *sdd*, *šdd* and *šdḏ* all provide suitable candidates and would appear orthographically identical in this period. Safaitic knows both *sd* and *šd* as personal names, probably *sadd* and *šadd* respectively. The name *šaddād* is common in the early Islamic period and would appear to have been in use in the sixth century, as it is the patronymic of the Jāhilī poet *'Antarah b. Šaddād*. The spelling *šd* may therefore represent a variant of this name, *šādd*, an active participial form. The space following the second letter of this name is badly weathered. It is possible that another letter followed the *d*, in which case one can perhaps restore the name as *šaddād*. Grohmann read it as سدد, but the medial denticle required for this interpretation is not present.<sup>27</sup>

The final *dāl* opens rather widely, extending below the baseline. A similar shape is again encountered in FaS 5b (see Table 9).

### 2.3 | The palaeographic unity of the text and dating

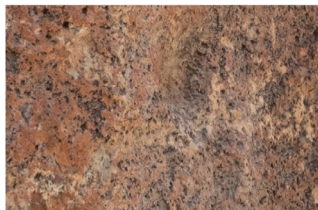

Grohmann assumed that all three lines formed a single text but acknowledged that the second and third lines seem to have been produced in a “more cursive fashion”.<sup>28</sup> In fact, there are two features that distinguish the lower two lines from the first, but cursiveness does not seem to be one of them. The first line is written in slightly smaller characters as compared to the latter two. The *rē* of line 2 is somewhat longer than the two *rē*'s of line 1, but it is also distinct from the *rē* of line 3 in the word *br* as discussed above. This irregularity can be explained in light of the inscription's context on the panel. The most suitable part of the rock face—the left half—had already been occupied by a large Thamudic D inscription, consisting of two columns, and a rock drawing of a seated man. Thus, our author chose to carve his text on the right half, which lacked a suitable place to stand. It therefore seems that he stood on a movable stone or on his toes to produce the text. Lines 2 and 3 appear to have been carved

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, the Jebel Usays inscription and the Ḥarrān inscription.

<sup>27</sup>Grohmann, 1962: 3.

<sup>28</sup>Grohmann, 1962.

TABLE 9 The open *dāl*

Rī' al-Zallālah	FaS 5b
	
سدد	احمد

first at a natural height. There is a large irregularity in the stone under line 3, which caused our writer to then add his final line above and to the right of line 2. The slightly different position of the text on the panel also meant that it experienced a different weathering pattern. While the first two letters of line 1—س— are weathered in a similar way to lines 2 and 3, as they are positioned directly above that text, the remaining letters have a lighter patina, matching the different water run-off on the stone. This weathering pattern also affects the final *hē* of line 2, which is similar in patina to the middle portion of line 1.

Paleographically, all three lines fit comfortably into the Paleo-Arabic category and seem to lie on a continuum between the Ḥimā Paleo-Arabic texts with which it shares the distinct compact shape of the *kāf* and the inscriptions of the region between Tabūk and al-Ḥigr published by *Farīq al-Ṣahrā'*. Most of the text's diagnostic features, including the shape of the final *hē* and *mīm*, connect it closely to the inscription FaS 5b, suggesting that both share a common scribal background.

Unlike most Paleo-Arabic texts, the Rī' al-Zallālah inscription lacks *wawation*, the orthographic practice of appending a *wāw* to primarily triptotic personal names.<sup>29</sup> This would not be the first Paleo-Arabic text to do so. The Jebel Usays inscription also lacks the feature. Two unpublished texts from the northern Ḥigāz also systematically lack *wawation*.<sup>30</sup> As discussed in Al-Jallad (2018a: 197–198 and 2021b), the *wawation* is found in the signature of the scribe of PERF 558, and a new early Islamic inscription from north-west Arabia (unpublished) also exhibits this feature.<sup>31</sup> This suggests that the loss of *wawation* was not a universal development demarcating Paleo-Arabic from early Islamic Arabic. Rather, the feature seems to have been optional as early as 528 CE (Jebel Usays) and that it perhaps was regarded as archaic, making it especially suitable for the carving of monumental style texts, such as public rock graffiti.

These palaeographic features—along with the particular introductory formula—indicate that the Rī' al-Zallālah inscription was not a product of the standardised Arabic of

the early Islamic period, the earliest witness to which on rock is the Zuhayr inscription dated to 24 AH. Considering all the evidence discussed above, a pre-Islamic provenance seems quite certain, but any date from the late fifth century CE to the rise of the Islamic polity is equally plausible. While it is within the realm of possibility that this inscription reflects a survival of a local, Paleo-Arabic writing tradition following the domination of Ṭā'if by the Medinan state, its palaeographic features and language would nevertheless reflect the pre-Islamic situation of the region. But there is nothing to support such a late dating of the inscription and it is significant that the closest specimens to our present inscription come from Ḥimā and date to 470 CE and 513 CE.

## 2.4 | Interpretation

The Rī' al-Zallālah text consists of two sections: a signature and an invocation addressing the audience, structurally similar to the Paleo-Arabic inscriptions of the northern Ḥigāz, which address the audience with *سلم انتم* “may you (m.pl.) be at peace”.

Line 1: <i>brk-[k]m rb-n'</i>	“may our Lord bless you
Line 2: <i>'n' .rh</i>	I am {Q}rh
Line 3: <i>br sd</i>	son of Sd”

### 2.4.1 | Invocation: *brk-[k]m rb-n'* “may our Lord bless you”

From the perspective of Islamic formulae, the most natural reading of this phrase is *برحم ربنا*, where the first verb can be taken as either *yarḥam* or *tarahḥama*. Grohmann read the phrase as *yarḥam rabbu-nā* “may our Lord have mercy upon”, with the names in lines 2 and 3 as its object.<sup>32</sup> This is because the photograph he was working from did not capture the large *'n'* preceding the first name. Once we take this word into consideration, Grohmann's interpretation becomes impossible. If one wishes to maintain the reading *yarḥam rabbu-nā*, it must be regarded as a separate invocation, semantically disconnected from the signature. While it remains tempting to take the first line as

<sup>29</sup>On the background of this feature and its use across Nabataean, Nabataeo-Arabic, and Paleo-Arabic inscriptions, see Al-Jallad, 2021b.

<sup>30</sup>See <https://safaitic.blogspot.com/2021/06/two-new-6th-c-ce-arabic-inscription.html>.

<sup>31</sup>This text was shared with Ahmad Al-Jallad personally and will be published in the near future.

<sup>32</sup>Grohmann, 1962: 3.



TABLE 10 A comparison of the Paleo-Arabic *kāf* and *hā*

Rī' al-Zallālah	FaS 5b	FaS 5b
		
بركم	احمد	كعب

such, the shape of the *hā* in FaS 5b, the hand of which is virtually identical to the present inscription, should inform our judgement. The initial *hā* forms a 45-degree angle and extends far below the baseline and lacks an up-tick. These facts make reading glyph 3 of line 1 as a *hā* virtually impossible (see Table 10).

The word *brkm* does not yield a meaningful lexeme in Arabic or any related language. Rather, it should be parsed as an optative verb *bārak* followed by the second person plural oblique pronoun *kum*. The writing of both *kāf*'s as one suggests that there was no intervening vowel. Our writer therefore applied the rules of the representation of consonantal gemination to this sequence: *bārak-kum* = <brkm>. This phenomenon is encountered in the Quranic Consonantal Text as well but with first person objective pronouns. The particle *'inna* when followed by the first person singular or plural object clitic often yields the form *'innī* and *'innā*, respectively, which is represented phonetically as *انى* and *انا* rather than morphologically as *انى* and *انا*. This phonetic spelling is inconsistently utilised in the Quran where we find *'atugādīlūnanī* (Q 7:71) but *'atuhāggūnnī* (Q 6:80) and *tāmannā* (Q 12:11). Additional variation is present between regional Quranic manuscripts, yielding *مكنى makkannī* / *مكنى makkānanī* (Q 18:95), *لياتياني la-yātiyannī* / *لياتياني la-yātiyannanī* (Q 27:21), and *تامروني tāmurūnnī* / *تامروني tāmurūnanī* (Q 39:64).<sup>33</sup> *k*-final verbs do not appear to assimilate with *-kum* in the Quran and are always spelled with two *kāf*'s, as in *منسككم manāsikakum* (Q 2:200), *يدررككم yudrikkum* (Q 4:78), *بشرككم bi-shirkikum* (Q 35:14) and *سلككم salakakum* (Q 74:42). Notable, however, with the exception of *bi-shirkikum*, is the assimilation in those words in the reading tradition of Abū 'Amr.<sup>34</sup> Van Putten has described this phenomenon as “Assimilation across vowels” and stops short of interpreting it as evidence for the loss of final short vowels.<sup>35</sup>

The different assimilation pattern observed in this inscription speaks to the absence of standardised orthographic conventions employed across Arabia at the time. Phonetic spellings are common in the Paleo-Arabic

inscriptions. The inscription FaS 4, for example, does not maintain the *alif* of the definite article when it is elided following a vowel. For example, *wa-l-quwwah* is not spelled *والقوة* as it might be in the Quran but rather phonetically as *ولقوه*. In another Paleo-Arabic inscription from the same region,<sup>36</sup> the *lām* of the article is dropped when assimilated to coronal consonants. For example, the phrase “feeding the guest” is spelled *اطعم اضيف* rather than *اطعم الضيف*. The writing of two contiguous *ks* as one in the present inscription follows the same phonetic principle as the aforementioned texts. Thus, Quranic orthography seems to be innovative in this way by clearly writing morphemes separately even if they happen to form a geminate cluster as in *yudrikkum*, *يدرركم* (Q 4:78).

The signature introduced by the first person pronoun *'n* is common in early Arabic inscriptions: both Paleo-Arabic and early Islamic and may speak to a continuity of certain writing formulae across the Pre-Islam–Islam divide (see Table 11).<sup>37</sup>

#### 2.4.2 | The collocation of *brk* and *rb*

The combination of *brk* and *rb* is quite spectacular from the perspective of the pagan Arabian inscriptions. In the tens of thousands of these documented so far—across North Arabian, South Arabian and Nabataean scripts—*rb* is never used as an epithet of the old gods and the verb *brk* “to bless” is virtually absent from invocations in the pre-monotheistic period.<sup>38</sup> Both appear to be part of the stock of monotheistic vocabulary borrowed into Sabaic from Hebrew and Aramaic

<sup>36</sup>This text was published in a video on Twitter; a preliminary edition is published here: <https://safaitic.blogspot.com/2021/06/two-new-6th-c-ae-arabic-inscriptions.html>.

<sup>37</sup>This formula is used even earlier in the Thamudic D inscriptions, which span from northern Arabia to the area of Ṭā'if, and is occasionally encountered in Safaitic and Hismaic.

<sup>38</sup>Robin, 2003: 143–144. The verb is attested in a couple of Safaitic inscriptions, once in connection with Allāt; see Al-Jallad & Jaworska, 2019: 62. These rare attestations may be explained as borrowings from nearby Aramaic-writing cultures, including the Judaeans with whom Safaitic writers were in contact (Al-Jallad, 2021a: appendix).

<sup>33</sup>Sidky, 2020: 145.

<sup>34</sup>Ibn al-Ġazarī, 2018: 2: 890.

<sup>35</sup>Van Putten, forthcoming: §A.3.5.

TABLE 11 The 'n' formula in Paleo-Arabic and early Islamic texts

Inscription	Formula	Location; Date
Jebel Usays Inscription	<i>'nh rqym br m'rf</i> <i>'l-'wsy</i>	Jebel Usays, Syria; 528 CE
Harrān Inscription	<i>'n srhyl br ṭlmw</i>	Harrān, Syria; 568 CE
FaS 2	<i>'nh knnh br qysw</i>	Northern Ḥigāz; Paleo-Arabic undated
FaS 3	<i>'n 'l'l'w br 'mr</i>	Northern Ḥigāz; Paleo-Arabic undated
Zuhayr Inscription	<i>'n' zhyr</i>	17 km s. of al-Higr; 644–5 CE.
FaS Abdalmalik <sup>a</sup>	<i>'n' 'bd' lmlk bn mrwn</i>	Jebel Ḥimsā, NW Saudi Arabia; < 685 CE

<sup>a</sup>This text was discovered by Farīq al-Ṣaḥrā' (<https://alsahra.org/2013/10/%d8%b1%d8%ad%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%b9%d8%a8%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d8%b6%d8%ad%d9%89-1434-2-%d8%b0%d9%83%d8%b1%d8%a8%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%a8%d8%b9%d9%8a%d9%86-%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%89/>) and discussed further in Imbert 2015.

in the fourth century CE,<sup>39</sup> following the Ḥimyarite adoption of Jewish-inspired monotheism.<sup>40</sup>

The verb *brk* is attested once in an invocation in a clearly Jewish Sabaic inscription.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, *rb* appears to be a relatively late title. It is also attested in Sabaic to refer to the Jewish god, *rb hd* “lord of the Jews” and so far only occurs in South Arabian Jewish texts. The term is calqued in the Sabaic divine title for the monotheistic god: *mr' smyn* “Lord of Heaven” and *mr' smyn w 'rdn* “Lord of Heaven and Earth”. In North Arabia, the Jewish god took the Aramaic title *mry'lm* “Lord of Eternity”, common in Rabbinic texts.<sup>42</sup>

While the most common term for the monotheistic god in the Paleo-Arabic inscriptions is *al-'ilāh*/*الله* and the orthographic variant *illāh*/*الله*,<sup>43</sup> the term *Rabb* is encountered

in one unpublished Paleo-Arabic inscription from the Northwestern Ḥigāz, the so-called 'Abd-Shams inscription.<sup>44</sup> It is worth repeating its contents here.

بسمك اللهم انا عدد سمس بن المعنر بن سعور ربه

“In your name O Allāh, I am 'Abd-Shams son of al-Muḡīrah, who seeks the forgiveness of his Lord”.<sup>45</sup>

The identification of this 'Abd-Shams son of al-Muḡīrah is unclear, but it is tempting to connect him with the Qurashite 'Abd-Šams b. al-Muḡīrah al-Maḥzūmī, grandfather of the third caliph 'Uthmān's wife, Fāṭimah bint al-Walīd b. 'Abd-Šams.<sup>46</sup> The text is undoubtedly monotheistic—the seeking of forgiveness *'istigfār* is a concept that is completely alien to the pagan Arabian texts attested centuries earlier. This, coupled with the use of the term *rabb* as a title of Allāh, likely a dialectal variant of *al-'ilāh*, strongly implies that its author was a follower of some form of Arabian monotheism, if not a non-Rabbinic form of Judaism. The absence of a cross and other clearly Christian phraseology, like the trinity, speak against identifying its author as belonging to a Christian community.<sup>47</sup>

*Rabb* is attested again in the undated but clearly late Jabal Ḍabūb inscription, carved in the Late Sabaic minuscule hand but in an early Arabic dialect. The text contains a monotheistic prayer to Allāh, who is called *rb smwt*, that is, *rabb as-samāwāt* “Lord of the heavens”, cf. Q 19:65.<sup>48</sup> Al-Jallad (forthcoming) has argued that the text should be regarded as an example of pre-Islamic Arabian monotheistic liturgy and likely dates to the decades preceding the rise of the Medinan state. It is worth repeating the entire inscription here, following the interpretation of Al-Jallad (forthcoming):

Introduction: <i>bsm lh rḥmn</i>	“In the name of Allāh, the Raḥmān”
Invocation 1: <i>rḥm-n rb s'mwt</i>	“have mercy upon us, O lord of the heavens”
Invocation 2: <i>rzq-n m-fdl-k</i>	“satisfy us by means of your favour”
Invocation 3: <i>w-'tr-n mḥ-h s'kmt 'ym-n</i>	“and grant us the essence of it, the gift of our days”

This usage of the title anticipates its deployment in the Quran, where it functions as a title of Allāh, corresponding to *mr'* and *mry* in Sabaic and Nabataean respectively.

<sup>39</sup>On similar vocabulary including *slt* “prayer”, *zkt* “purity”, see Robin, 2015: 15–295.

<sup>40</sup>By the late fourth century CE, the kingdom of Ḥimyar had abandoned the traditional cults of southwest Arabia in favour of a new monotheistic religion centred around a deity primarily called *rḥmn* “the merciful one”, a title of the Jewish god loaned from Aramaic. A great debate surrounds the exact identity of this group: Robin (2021) advances a convincing series of arguments, based on the textual evidence, that Ḥimyar had converted to a non-Rabbinic form of Judaism characterised by its lack of belief in the afterlife. Beeston (1984), followed by Gajda (2017), prefers regarding South Arabian monotheism as an idiosyncratic belief system inspired by—yet separate from—Judaism. Al-Jallad (forthcoming) employs the neutral label “Arabian monotheism” to refer to what may have been a spectrum of ultimately Jewish-inspired monotheistic belief systems that had replaced older Arabian religion throughout the Peninsula between the fourth and sixth centuries CE, ultimately culminating in Islam.

<sup>41</sup>See <http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=30&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=830811091&recId=2384&mark=02384%2C001%2C001>

<sup>42</sup>See, for example, UJadhNab 538 (Nehmé, 2018: 185–186), which mentions *mry'lm* in an inscription dated to Passover (*hg 'l-ptyr*) of the year 303 CE. The same deity is mentioned in JSNab 17 (see Macdonald's contribution to Fiema et al., 2015, for the latest edition), which could suggest that its author was Jewish or an Arabian monotheist. The epithet is used frequently in the Aramaic targums.

<sup>43</sup>Robin, 2020: 1–146. The form *الله* is attested frequently in the inscriptions from the northern Ḥigāz documented by Farīq al-Ṣaḥrā'.

<sup>44</sup><https://twitter.com/mohammed93athar/status/1003029694671966208?lang=hi>

<sup>45</sup>The switch of person from the first in the signature to third in the narrative is odd. We may hypothesise that the narrative is an asyndetic relative clause, an odd construction from the point of view of Classical Arabic but frequently attested in older forms of Arabic; see Al-Jallad, 2019: 362.

<sup>46</sup>Ibn Sa'd, 1990: 3: 40.

<sup>47</sup>One may use the introductory formulae of the Abraha inscriptions as an example as well as the crosses that accompany several of the Paleo-Arabic texts from Ḥimā, Dūmat al-Jandal, and the Yazīd inscription.

<sup>48</sup>The *editio princeps* is al-Hajj & Faq'as, 2018; the reading and interpretation here come from Al-Jallad's (forthcoming) re-edition.

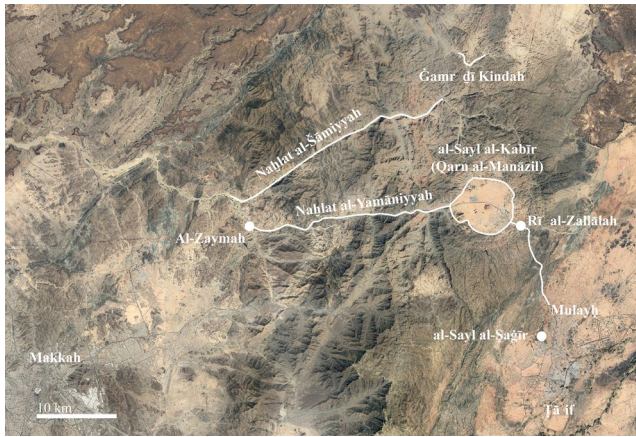


FIGURE 5 Tā'if, Rī' al-Zallālah, al-Sayl al-Kabīr and routes to Mecca

Sabaic: *mr' smyn w 'rdn* = Quran: *rabb as-samāwāt wa-l-'arḍ*

Nabataean: *mry'lm'* = Quran *rabb al-'ālamīn*

It should also be noted that *al-rabb* is a common way of rendering the Tetragrammaton and Greek Κύριος in early Arabic translations of the Bible.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps one of the earliest attestations of this is the Graeco-Arabic rendition of Psalm 77 (78):21.<sup>50</sup>

διὰ τοῦτο ἤκουσεν κύριος

λιδέλικ σεμιγ ελραβ /li-ḍēlik semi' el-rab/

“Therefore the Lord heard”

In modern Egyptian Arabic, the term *rabbina* “our Lord” has become the generic term for God, corresponding to Allāh in colloquial usage.

The above facts indicate that our text shares a similar confessional context to the Late Sabaic inscriptions, which are Jewish, Arabian monotheistic and Christian, and other Paleo-Arabic texts, all of which are so far monotheistic and, when possible to determine further, Christian. While *rabb* is used exclusively in Jewish contexts in virtually all Ancient South Arabian inscriptions, the 'Abd-Shams inscription, the Jabal Ḍabūb inscription and the Quran itself imply that it was a title used more widely by Arabian monotheists to the north and in the Arabic language. It is therefore impossible to know if our writer was Jewish or perhaps a Jewish-inspired

<sup>49</sup>Note that the divine title Κύριος is attested once in abbreviated form in an unpublished inscription from the area of Diyār Bilī, between Tabūk and al-'Ulā, in an inscription recorded by Mohammad al-Balawī online and published online. The text reads: KE σόσον τον'Ο lord, save him', where KE is the nomen sacrum of Κύριος “lord”. A preliminary edition of this text can be found at: <https://safaitic.blogspot.com/2021/04/the-stratigraphy-of-religions-in.html>.

<sup>50</sup>Al-Jallad, 2020: 80.

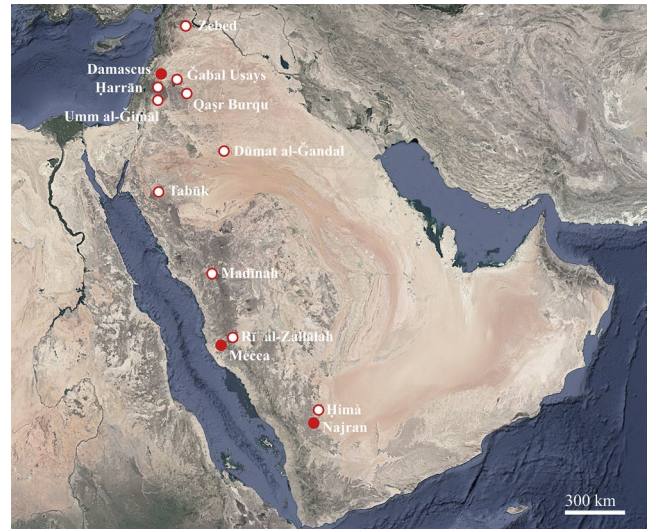


FIGURE 6 Distribution of Paleo-Arabic inscriptions – white: sites of inscriptions, red: major cities

Arabian monotheist, similar to the author of the 'Abd-Shams inscription and other Paleo-Arabic texts.

The known Paleo-Arabic texts break down into the following categories:

- 1) Simple signatures with no confessional information
- 2) Signatures plus monotheistic invocations
- 3) Christian inscriptions

These texts together imply the widespread penetration of monotheism across Arabia in the late pre-Islamic period, even in areas previously believed to have been late bastions of paganism, such as Dūmat al-Ġandal and Tā'if itself, which ibn al-Kalbī regarded as the centre of Allāt's cult in the sixth century.<sup>51</sup> The discovery of the present text in the area between Tā'if and Mecca confirms this trend and demonstrates the expansion of monotheism to the very environment of nascent Islam.

### 3 | THE TRAJECTORY OF OUR WRITER

Two main routes between Mecca and Tā'if are identified in the classical sources. The first is a southerly route involving a series of relatively narrow switchbacks traversing a highly mountainous region called *al-Hadā*. The prominent peak is known as *ġabal al-Karā*. The journey along this path is said to take two days.<sup>52</sup>

Towards the north is a far less precarious, albeit longer, route. It follows a series of *wādīs* (river beds), beginning

<sup>51</sup>Ibn al-Kalbī, 1913: 16. It is further noteworthy that, to date, none of the Thamudic inscriptions from the region of Tā'if mention Allāt, even in personal names.

<sup>52</sup>Al-Ḥarbī, 1969: 6534.

TABLE 12 Distribution of the Paleo-Arabic inscriptions known thus far

Location	Number of texts	Date	Publication
Himā, KSA	25	2 texts: 470 CE, 513 CE	Robin et al., 2014
Rī' al-Zallālah, KSA	1	undated	Present article
Medina, KSA	2	undated	Unpublished: <a href="https://twitter.com/mohammed93athar/status/1411396316605911047?s=20">https://twitter.com/mohammed93athar/status/1411396316605911047?s=20</a>
Northwest Hīgāz (FaS), KSA	9 + 2	undated	Unpublished: texts documented by Farīq al-Saḥrā' and other amateur explorers.
Dūmat al-Ġandal, KSA	2	548 CE	Nehmé, 2018
Umm al-Ġimāl, Jordan	1	undated	Nehmé, 2018
Qaṣr Burqu', Jordan	1	undated	Shdaifāt et al., 2018
Jebel Usays, Syria	1	528 CE	Fiema et al., 2015 (Macdonald's contribution)
Harrān, Syria	1	568 CE	Fiema et al., 2015 (Macdonald's contribution)
Zebed, Syria	1	512 CE	Fiema et al., 2015 (Macdonald's contribution)

with *Mulayh*, which leads into a large circular valley known as *al-sayl al-kabīr* from the east. The inscription is found at *rī' al-zallālah*, which is approximately 2 kilometres east of the entrance to *al-sayl* along this *wādī*. *Al-sayl al-kabīr* is also known as *qarn al-manāzil* and represents a principal boundary (*mīqāt*) for Muslim pilgrims. Exiting *al-sayl* from the west follows *naḥlat al-yamāniyyah*, which is the southern counterpart to *naḥlat al-šāmiyyah*—two *wādīs* which meet near Al-Zaymah and funnel into Mecca. This route is also identified in the *Maḡāzī* literature as the one allegedly utilised by the prophet Muḥammad and his army in c.630 CE for the unsuccessful siege of Ṭā'if after the battle of Ḥunayn.<sup>53</sup> Key landmarks along with the location of the inscription are identified in Figure 5.

The trajectory of our writer and whether or not he was travelling to or from Mecca cannot be known from this single inscription. Indeed, *al-sayl al-kabīr* is a regional locus with tributaries feeding into it from multiple directions. Nevertheless, given the inscription's placement, the only two remaining logical paths are west towards Mecca, as discussed, or to the north. In particular, a *wādī* belonging to *ḡamr dī kindah* near al-Qufayf seems to be of some importance in the Islamic period, as it is identified in the literary sources as the ancient quarters of the tribe of Kindah prior to their claimed migration to Yemen.<sup>54</sup> Geographically speaking, this area north of *al-sayl* mediates access to the northern Hijaz and parts of the eastern deserts. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine the inscription as being carved on a journey to the north, as opposed to towards Mecca. In fact, we have found evidence of north–south travel based on a set of Thamudic D inscriptions left by the same individual at this same location and further north in *ḡamr dī kindah*.<sup>55</sup>

The distribution of the Paleo-Arabic inscriptions known thus far is presented in Figure 6 and Table 12.

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<sup>53</sup>Al-Wāqidī, 1989: 3: 939 and ibn Hiṣām, 1990: 4: 120.

<sup>54</sup>Ibn al-Kalbī, 2010: 27–29, Al-Ḥarbī, 1969: 603 and Al-Ḥamawī, 1995: 4: 212.

<sup>55</sup>Details of these inscriptions will be published in a future paper. See the Appendix for an edition of the Thamudic D text present on the same boulder as this inscription.

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## APPENDIX

### 1 | THE RĪʿ AL-ZALLĀLAH THAMUDIC TEXTS

Four columns of Thamudic inscriptions—forming three inscriptions—are carved on the same panel as the Paleo-Arabic text discussed in the main body of this article (Figures 7 and 8). The three columns to the right of the carving of the seated man can be roughly classified under the rubric of Thamudic D. The first text runs from left to right.

#### Inscription 1:

L: ḥfr ʿlk

R: bn qmʿt

“ʿlk son of Qmʿt has carved (this inscription)”

ḥfr: This appears to be a suffix conjugation verb cognate with Classical Arabic ḥafara “to carve”, here referring to the act of producing an inscription or perhaps the rock drawing. The verb ḥfr is attested in Safaitic, but there it refers to digging a trench.<sup>56</sup> The same meaning is attested in Minaic.<sup>57</sup>

ʿlk: The name ʿlk is extremely strange. Semitic languages do not usually reduplicate the first radical of a root

<sup>56</sup>Al-Jallad & Jaworska, 2019: 84.

<sup>57</sup>For example, Robin, 1992: 61–65.



FIGURE 7 Panel of Thamudic and Paleo-Arabic inscriptions at Rī' al-Zallālah

and two contiguous *'ayns* would furthermore violate the phonotactic constraints of root formation. Nevertheless, the reading is certain and since this writer left three other inscriptions to the north of this place, we can be certain it is not dittography. Perhaps the only source of doubt would be the fact that the first *'ayn* is not entirely closed, but this seems to have more to do with the hand of the writer rather than a deliberately distinct letter shape—indeed, his other texts demonstrate that the first letter of his name must be read as an *'ayn*. Moreover, a nearly closed circle contrasting with a full circle is not a graphemic distinction known in any Ancient North or South Arabian script.

While *'lk* is not known from any other corpus of Ancient North Arabian inscriptions, the name *'lk* is attested three times in Safaitic and would seem to derive from the Arabic root *'-l-k* “to masticate”.<sup>58</sup> One could hypothesise that *'lk* derives from an elative form *'lk* with regressive assimilation.

*qm't*: In contrast to our author's given name, his patronymic is a reasonable Arabian name, probably vocalised as *qumā'at*, derived from the root *q-m-* “to oppress”, cf. the common name Zālim. This name is attested once in Safaitic, and is known from the Arabo-Islamic tradition.

#### Inscription 2:

*ṭm hfr*

“Ṭm has carved (this inscription)”

*ṭm*: Ṭm is attested thrice in Safaitic. According to the locals of Ṭā'if, the name remains in use today as Ṭāmī. It would appear to derive from the root *t-m-y/w*, which has a range of meanings, including “to be high” and “to exalt”, similar to the name *'aliyy*.

#### Inscription 3:

{b} {h} {8} {?} d d

This inscription is located to the left of the head of the seated man. It is not currently possible to decipher the text;

#### Inscription 1

7700157  
 7310017  
 709017

#### Inscription 2

73E31  
 73E31

FIGURE 8 Rī' al-Zallālah Thamudic D inscriptions

the current reading is based on the photograph published in Grohmann, 1962. The inscription has experienced harsh weathering since it was photographed in 1951 and today all that remains on the rock is a remnant of the 8-glyph, a partial *d* and the final *d*.

The authors of inscriptions one and two, *'lk* and *ṭm*, left two other texts further north, located at Ġamr ḏī Kindah and then further northeast into the Wādī. Together these reveal a route connecting the region of Qufayf and perhaps onwards towards Najd with Ṭā'if, foreshadowing the *darb al-zubaydah* Ḥajj route. These texts will be treated in detail, along with the current inscription, in a forthcoming publication.

## 2 | CITED PALEO-ARABIC AND EARLY ISLAMIC INSCRIPTIONS AND PAPYRI

**Dūmat al-Ġandal inscription:** A Christian Arabic-script graffito from the region of Dūmat al-Ġandal, northern Saudi Arabia; see Nehmé, 2017.

<sup>58</sup>OCIANA (accessed 19/08/2021).

**Fariq al-Ṣaḥrā' texts (FaS):** A small collection of Paleo-Arabic texts discovered by the amateur group Fariq al-Ṣaḥrā' between Tabūk and al-'Ulā and published on their website: <https://alsahra.org/>. None of these texts carries an absolute date.

**Ḥarrān Inscription:** Bilingual Arabic-Greek monumental inscription from Ḥarrān, Syria, dated to 568 CE; for the latest edition, see Macdonald's commentary in Fiema et al., 2015.

**Ḥimā (Nagrān) Paleo-Arabic Arabic inscriptions:** a collection of pre-Islamic Arabic-script inscriptions from the region of Nagrān, the earliest dating to 470 CE. On these texts, see Robin, al-Ghabbān & al-Sa'īd, 2014.

**Jebel Usays inscription:** A small rock graffito at Jebel Usays in southern Syria, dated to 528 CE; for the latest edition, see Macdonald's commentary in Fiema et al., 2015.

**PERF 558:** The earliest surviving dated Arabic papyrus (bilingual Arabic-Greek) dated Jumādā I, 22 AH, April

25, 643 CE, found in Heracleopolis, Egypt. See Grohmann, 1966.

**Umm al-Jimal inscription:** Undated Paleo-Arabic inscription from the Ḥawrān region of Jordan. For the latest discussions, see Hoyland, 2010: 40 and Nehmé, 2017.

**Yazīd inscription:** An early Christian Arabic inscription from the region of Qaṣr Burqu' in Northeastern Jordan; see Shdaifat et al., 2017.

**Zebed inscription:** A Paleo-Arabic inscription part of a trilingual text (+ Greek and Syriac), dated to 512 CE, located some 60 km south of Aleppo, Syria. For the most recent discussion, see Macdonald's contribution to Fiema et al., 2015.

**Zuhayr inscription:** An early Islamic inscription, dated to the 24 AH = 644 CE, located 17 km south of al-Ḥigr. See al-Ghabbān, 2008.