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EVIDENCE FROM A NABATAEAN
INSCRIPTION REGARDING WATER
AND CULT IN NABATAEA,
WITH SOME REMARKS
ON THE NABATAEAN ROYAL FAMILY

Abstract: The article presents a Nabataean text inscribed in raised relief on a bronze plate and dated to the seventh year of the Nabataean king Aretas IV (3 BC). The text is significant since it mentions the dedication of a water well/cistern by Aretas, to his god Dushara, the God of Gaia “for the life of himself and his wife *hldw*, queen of the Nabataeans, and their daughter *ps’l*.” The paper includes a commentary on the vocabulary of the text and sheds some light on water and its association with the cult in Nabataea. In addition, it provides some details about *hldw*, queen of the Nabataeans and *ps’l*, the daughter of Aretas and *hldw*, allowing an update of the Nabataean royal family tree.

Keywords: Nabataean inscriptions; water and cult in Nabataea; the Nabataean royal family; cultic dedications; Nabataean queens and princesses; Aretas, Huldu, Phasaël

Preface

The inscription dealt with in this study (Figures 1 and 2) was already published in short form by Rachel Barkay in connection with coins of year 7 of the Nabataean king Aretas and his daughter Phasaël (Barkay 2019, 49–50). We offer below a full analysis of this important document.

While its provenance is uncertain, its content seems to indicate that this text was found in modern-day Wādī Mūsā in southern Jordan. The text mentions the Nabataean name of Wādī Mūsā, *gy'*, where a water well/cistern was erected by Aretas IV.

The text is inscribed in raised relief, and such kinds of texts were produced using the lost-wax casting process, a widespread technique in antiquity (Sholan and Jändl 2013, 144). It was written inside a frame similar to some of the doorways of Nabataean rock-cut facades, which are surmounted by a triangular pediment, with a tympanum and three acroterion bases (See for example McKenzie 1990, 140–172). Inside the tympanum is an eagle, the most frequently portrayed bird in Nabataean iconography, which appears in Nabataean art in a variety of forms, in a single element decorating rock-cut facades over the pediment of the doorway or under its arch (McKenzie 1990, Pls. 2; 3; 63: d) (for more details about eagles in Nabataean iconography see al-Salameen 2012).

The eagle is usually depicted in Nabataean iconography in a distinctive way: highlighting relatively thick legs and open wings, sometimes with a round-eyed head turned to the proper right. This representation is also found on some Nabataean coins (Barkay 2019, n. 39 and 91).

The eagle held much symbolic power among the Nabataeans and appears often in association with funerary complexes as well as with the royal family. The eagle depicted on coins apparently has a specifically Nabataean religious significance (Meshorer 1975, 25). Wenning associates the eagles on the tombs at Ḥegra with Dushara (1996, 257). This may be correct since the inscriptions convey a dedication to this god.

The majority of Nabataean texts are inscribed in stone. Texts written on metal objects other than coins, are uncommon. The few examples include a fragmentary inscribed bronze plaque with a Nabataean text found in the Petra Great Temple in 1998 (Joukowsky 1998, 210), an inscribed Nabataean bronze oil burner dedicated to Obodas that was found in Wādī Mūsā (Al-Salameen and Falahat 2014) and two inscribed bronze lamps that formed part of religious dedications (Al-Salameen and Shdaifat 2014, al-Salameen 2014). The new bronze tablet constitutes a remarkable addition to this small group of inscriptions.

The Text

The text is eight lines long and covers the whole surface of the plate (Pl. 1: 1–2), which measures 35 by 45 cm.

The inscription was skillfully fashioned, and all the letters are well-presented and can be read with certainty. The characters are even in size. The forms of the letters are typical of Nabataean inscriptions dated to the reign of Aretas (see for example Cantineau 1930/1932, II, n. 5–6, 28, 31–32). The letters are regularly and beautifully carved.

Transliteration

*dnh gb my' dy 'bd
 ḥrtt mlk nbṭw rḥm
 'mh ldwšr' 'lhh 'lh
 gy' 'l ḥyy nṣšh wdy
 ḥldw 'ḥth mlkt nbṭw
 wṣṣ' l brthm byrh 'yr
 šnt šb' ḥrtt mlk
 nbṭw rḥm 'mh.*

Translation

This is the water well/cistern that was made by Aretas, king of the Nabataeans, lover of his people, to Dushara his god, the god of Gaia, for his life and that of *Hldw*, his sister, queen of the Nabataeans, and *Pṣ' l* their daughter, in the month of Iyar, year seven of Aretas, king of the Nabataeans, lover of his people.

Commentary on the vocabulary

dnh 'this', a common Aramaic demonstrative pronoun (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 333).

gb my' 'water well/cistern'. The word *gb'* with emphatic ending is attested once in Nabataean in the Aṣḥaṭ text, which refers to the construction of a triclinium and a well/cistern that were dedicated to Dushara the god of Manbatu in the year 1 of Obodas I (Cantineau 1930/1932, II, 2–3). This Obodas is the son of Aretas II and became king in approximately 96 BC.

The word *gb*, which is attested in Aramaic, including Palmyrene, means 'cistern, well' (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 207). Scholars have debated its

origin. Some of them, like Cantineau, assumed that it is an Arabic loan-word (1930/32, 172), meanwhile others like O'Connor, alleged it to be Aramaic (1968, 216).

b'r, on the other hand, is also attested in Nabataean to refer to a certain type of cistern/well (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 141–142).

There are close similarities between *gb* and *b'r* in Arabic. *Jubb* denotes in Arabic 'a well that is not cased with stone or the like', or 'a well containing dirty water: or a deep well', or 'one that people have found; not one that they have dug', or 'a well that is not deep', or 'a well that is cut through rock, or smooth rock, or stones' (Lane 1968, 371; Ibn Manzour, *Jubb*).

my 'water', plural noun. This is a common Semitic word (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 619–621). It appears twice in Nabataean epigraphic material (Healey 2009, 63–65, Yadin *et al.* 2002, 6).

dy 'which, that' a common Aramaic relative pronoun (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 310ff).

bd 'he made', third person singular masculine perfect of 'bd (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 806ff). Barkay (2019, 50) reads this word as 'slave'. This interpretation is impossible since the phrase *dy* 'bd appears dozens of times in Nabataean, meaning 'which he made'.

Hrtt mlk nbṭw rḥm 'mh 'Aretas king of Nabataeans, lover of his people'. Aretas IV (9 BC to AD 40) is referred to in Nabataean inscriptions as *rḥm 'mh* 'the lover of his people'. He was doubtless the most important and successful Nabataean king. His reign represents the zenith of Nabataean civilization and was characterized by architectural achievements, economic prosperity, and political stability across the entire Nabataean realm.

ldwšr 'to Dushara', the major Nabataean deity.

'lhh 'his god', with third person singular masculine pronoun.

'lh gy 'the God of Gaia'. Gaia is identified with modern Wādī Mūsā. El-Ji is nowadays still used as the name of the central part of Wādī Mūsā. This toponym originated from the Semitic word represented by Hebrew *gay*, which means 'valley, place where waters flow together, low plain' (for more details about this name see al-Salameen and Falahat 2012, 41–42). Dushara, a Nabataean god par excellence, is identified as the 'God of Gaia' in several Nabataean inscriptions including one from Oboda in the Negev desert (Negev 1963, 113–117) and another one from al-Jawf (Savignac and Starcky 1957, 198). Additionally, it appears three times in the inscriptions of Darb al-Bakrah (Nehmé 2018, 33).

'lhyy 'for the life of'. This formula is common in Nabataean, Palmyrene, Edessan and Hatran dedicatory inscriptions of the first three centuries AD

(Healey 2001, 178–180; 2009, 53). Healey (2001, 178) concluded that it is mostly an expression of political loyalty.

npšh ‘himself’, with third person singular masculine pronoun. The word *npš* ‘soul, life’ is common in Semitic languages (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 744ff).

Hldw, *Ḥuldu*, is the name of the first wife of Aretas IV. It appears frequently in Nabataean, and is derived from the root *hld*, which means ‘lasting, eternal’ (Negev 1991, 29). Masculine and feminine names derived from this root are found in Palmyrene (Stark 1971, 22, 88), North Arabian (Harding 1971, 225–226), South Arabian (Hayajneh 1998, 130) and in Greek inscriptions where Semitic names are transcribed in Greek (Wuthnow 1930, 17, 119, 141).

’hth ‘his sister’, with third person singular masculine pronoun. The Nabataean queens were given the title *’ht mlk* ‘sister of the king’. This is the first occurrence of *hldw* as *’ht* ‘of the king’. Although it was assumed that the Nabataean consorts of kings were called ‘sisters’ as a general epithet, scrutiny of the coins and inscriptions shows that this title was not given to all queens or royal women (al-Fassi 2000, 45). Barkay (2016) concludes that the Nabataean queens were biological sisters of the kings, following the marriage customs of the Ptolemies.

mlkt nbṭw ‘queen of the Nabataeans’. *Hldw*, who was called *mlkt nbṭw*, appears on coins and later in inscriptions in Aretas’ first year (al-Fassi 2000, 44).

wps’l and *pš’l* = *Phasael*. The name *pš’l* is attested frequently in Nabataean inscriptions in reference to a member of the royal family (see discussion below). Its occurrence here, followed by *brthm* ‘their daughter’, confirms that it was used as a feminine name.

brthm ‘their daughter’, with third person plural pronoun. The word *brt* ‘daughter’ is a common Semitic word (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 188ff).

byrh ‘in the month’. The word consists of two parts: *b* ‘in’, a common Semitic preposition, and *yrh* ‘month’, which is common also in Punic, Phoenician, Canaanite and Aramaic inscriptions (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 469–470).

’yr, a loanword from Akkadian *Ayyāru(m)* (Black *et al.* 2000, 32). The month of *’yr* corresponds approximately to May. The name of this month is common in Aramaic, and it is a part of the Babylonian calendar (Sokoloff 1992, 48–49; Costaz 2002, 8).

šnt šb ’lhrtt mlk nbṭw rḥm ’mh ‘year seven of Aretas king of Nabataeans, lover of his people’, which corresponds to 3 BC. This is a common dating formula in Nabataean.

Discussion:

a) Water and cult in Nabataea

The text under study is significant since it talks about the dedication of a water well/cistern to Dushara, which supports the direct link between deities, cult, and water in Nabataea (see below). Before discussing this issue further, it is useful to shed some light on the Nabataeans' pioneering work in water management, which goes back to their early beginnings (Diodorus of Sicily 11, 48). Because of the desert climate and very limited annual precipitation, they depended on two major water sources: rainwater and spring water. They made the best use of these limited resources and developed advanced hydraulic engineering skills to overcome the problem. Rock-cut and built cisterns, dams and reservoirs were the most common devices constructed for water storage. These were filled with water through rock-cut channels formed along slopes of mountains.

The archaeological remains at Petra and its vicinity, including Wādī Mūsā, where the current text was found, provide us with information on a huge and sophisticated hydrological system (for further details see Bellwald 2007; 'Amr *et al.*, unpublished report). The existence of these hydrological remains indicates that the government made every effort to provide water for the inhabitants and to develop agriculture.

In the light of our current text and other available evidence, it is clear that water also had a ritual significance during the Nabataean period. The numerous basins found in a cultic context at Petra reveal the importance of water and purification for ritual practices (Alpass 2011, 56).

The occurrence of water sources near numerous Nabataean shrines and temples is notable. Almost every Nabataean shrine or temple has a nearby hydrological installation or a source of water of some size (Erickson-Gini 2015, 317). Water was most likely used in the temple as some kind of offering to the deity (Eddinder 2004, 23–24), and it may also be associated with rites of purification.

Religious monuments in Petra, for example, are located near water sources, aqueducts, cisterns, and channels, and this seems to indicate a desire to place the water supply under divine protection (Alpass 2011, 114). Among them are Qaṭṭar ed-Deir and Sadd el-Ma'ajin, which contain several niches and idol blocks as well as inscriptions (Healey 2001, 74–75). A considerable number of niches and *betyls* in Petra are located close to water sources, and it seems that the Nabataeans "perceived water as sacred and that many

examples of ornamental water display at Petra held religious significance” (Bedal 2000, 167).

The available archaeological evidence indicates that there were direct associations between water and some Nabataean gods such as Dushara. It seems that sanctuaries dedicated to him were regularly provided with water. This is evident in the story of the wife of Al-Ṭufayl ibn ‘Amr al-Dawsī¹ (died 633), who asked his wife upon her conversion to Islam to go to the *ḥimā* ‘temenos’ of Dushara and cleanse herself with its water, a wish she complied with (Ibn Hishām 1985,1/ 384).

It seems that this was a common tradition in pre-Islamic Arabia, where water had a significant religious role. Historical chronicles confirm that Hubal, one of the greatest idols of Quraish, was associated with water. When ‘Amro Bin Luḥāyī brought his statue, he placed it over the Al-Akhsaf² close to the Ka‘bah (al-Azruqī 2000, 41). It is worth mentioning that Hubal’s name is associated with Dushara in one of the tomb inscriptions in Ḥegra (Healey 1993, n. 16).

It is evident that similar traditions were also known in southern Arabia. A text was found in Arḥab in Yemen (Robin/al-Mašamayn 1) which mentions the dedication of a cistern (*brktn*) to the goddess *nwšm* (Robin and Ryckmans 1978; Mazzini 2005). The text indicates that the cistern, which was seemingly sacred, was not to be used either for watering animals or for washing, and it even threatens those who violate these proscriptions with a fine.

Epigraphic evidence has confirmed that certain deities were associated with water and hydrological cultic dedications³ among the Nabataeans. The Turkmāniyyah tomb inscription in Petra mentions dedications to Dushara, “the god of our lord, and his sacred throne and all the gods”, and these include wells/cisterns of water *b’rwt my’* (Healey 2009, 63–65). Another Nabataean inscription found in Oboda in the Negev and dated to the reign of Rabbel II (AD 70–106), refers to the construction of a dam *skr’* (Negev 1963, no. 10 p. 113–117). The meaning of the word *skr’* is not immediately clear, but it may refer to something related to the water system.

¹ He was one of the companions of Prophet Mohammad.

² Alternatively known as Al-Akkshaf.

³ Dedications in Nabataea were normally offered inside temples, as this is evident from cult statues, cultic figurines and dedications often found therein. In the Temple of the Winged Lions, for example, niches between the engaged columns of the cella may have been used for votive offerings (Healey 2001, 74). Other dedications and offerings included altars, idols, cult statues and pottery vessels.

This construction was dedicated to “Dushara, the god of Gaia.” Therefore, we have here an association of builders responsible for maintaining the water supply in honour of Dushara. Another short and incomplete Nabataean text from Oboda mentions the dedication of a dam: *dnh skr' dy qrb* ‘This dam which he dedicated’ (Negev 1961, no. 7a).

Additional inscriptions are to be found on some Nabataean dams in Petra and its environs (personal observation). Furthermore, there is an inscription incised on the left side of a Nabataean dam in Al-Kharazah near Wādī Rum that mentions the renewal of a dam in the year forty-one of Aretas IV (Milik 1958).

The famous Vegetation Goddess of the temple in Khirbet et-Tannur has a veil of leaves like those associated with water deities. This may represent the goddess of the La‘abān spring, as this spring is mentioned in an inscription of 8/7 BC found at Khirbet et-Tannur (McKenzie *et al.* 2013a, 31). Lion heads furnished with waterspouts were found in that temple (McKenzie *et al.* 2013, 114). In addition, parts of a water basin associated with the figure of Hadad were uncovered at the site (McKenzie *et al.* 2013, 24).

The association between cult and water springs is evident in other Nabataean sites. A sanctuary was built near the spring of ‘Ayn esh-Shellaleh in Wādī Rum. Close to this spring are numerous religious inscriptions mentioning the goddess Allāt and *betyls*, which further confirms the association between religious practices and springs of water (Healey 2013, 90).

In addition, a Nabataean text was found close to the La‘abān spring with a dedication by Natirel son of Zaydal for the Head of this spring (Savignac and Starcky 1957, 215–217; Healey 2013, 90).

b) *ḥldw*, queen of the Nabataeans and her daughter *pš'l*

There are two Nabataean inscriptions mentioning *ḥldw* as the wife of Aretas IV and queen of the Nabataeans: one from Khirbet et-Tannur and another from Puteoli in Italy (Savignac 1937, No. 1; CIS, II, 158). She was the first of Aretas IV’s queens to appear on coins by name in the first year of his reign (Meshorer 1975, n. 48). This shows that he was already married to her in 9 BC.

Littmann (1914, 50) vocalized her name as *Khald* and interpreted it to be the infinitive of the Arabic word *Ḥalad*, which means ‘retaining a youthful appearance in old age’, and he concluded that the name was given to both girls and boys. It seems that this name has its classical Arabic equivalent in Ḥālidah.

Queen *ḥldw* was depicted on coins of Aretas in the first year of his rule, showing her bust draped and veiled (Barkay 2019, 47, Figure 8.4). The regular drachmas of Aretas with the laureate head continued to be struck, whereas the bust of queen *ḥldw* appeared alone on the reverse until year 17 (8/9 AD) (Barkay 2019, 110–112).

It is worth mentioning that the reign of Aretas with his first wife *ḥldw* witnessed interruptions in the striking of silver coins, whereas there were plentiful issues in bronze (Schmitt-Korte and Price 1994, 103–104). The successor of Aretas, his son Malichus II, was not celebrated on special coins, so we may assume *pšʿl* had been the first-born child, who subsequently died (Schmitt-Korte and Price 1994, 104).

The name *pšʿl* appears as the name of one of Aretas’ children in the following inscriptions:

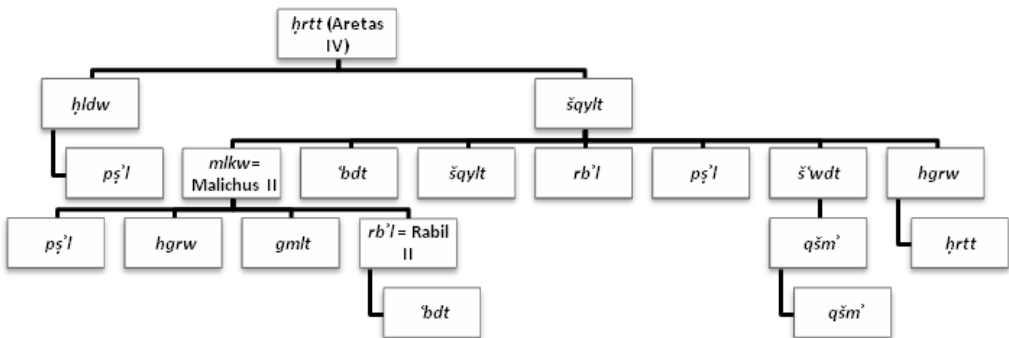
1. An inscription that was found in Petra and dated to the twenty ninth year of Aretas. It is dedicated to the life of Aretas, his sister *šqylt*, and his children *mlkw*, *ʿbdt*, *rbʿl*, *pšʿl*, *šʿwdt*, and *hgrw* (Cantineau 1930/1932, n. IV)

2. A Nabataean dedicatory inscription that was uncovered in Wādī Mūsā and had been dedicated to the life of Aretas, his sister *šqylt*, and their children *mlkw*, *ʿbdt*, *pšʿl*, and *šʿwdt* (Khairy 1981).

3. A Nabataean inscription from Oboda, which mentions *ʿbdt*, *pšʿl*, and *šʿwdt*, the children of *ḥrtt* (Negev 1961, n.1).

The name is also attested in an abbreviated form *pš* on some coins, which, as scholars have suggested, were minted to commemorate the birth of a son called Phasael in Aretas fifth year (Meshorer 1975, 48). This is now disproven.

Based on the above-mentioned inscriptions (Cantineau 1930/1932, n. IV, Khairy 1981, P. Yadin 2) including our current text, the following tree of the Nabataean royal family can be produced:



The birth of *pš' l* encouraged Aretas to issue commemorative coins (Meshorer 1975, 48; Barkay 2019, n. 114–118). Among the bronze coins of Aretas IV, there are two types, bearing either the letters *pš* or the full name *pš' l* (see Meshorer 1975, nos. 61; 61a–64a; Barkay 2019, n. 114–118). The obverse of these issues bears the laureate head of Aretas, and the reverse bears a palm branch and two parallel cornucopiae. One emission has the date 5 (5 BC) (Meshorer 1975, n. 59; Barkay 2019, n. 115).

Meshorer and other scholars identified the bearer of this name as the fourth son of Aretas, an assumption based on an inscription dated to the twenty-ninth year of Areats (Meshorer 1975, 48), but it is now clear that *pš' l* is the first daughter born after the king's accession to the throne (Huth 2010, 221).

A short inscription found in Petra mentions *pš' l mlkt nbṭw* (Milik and Starcky 1975, 112–115), which confirms that she was a daughter not a son.

In his *Jewish Antiquities* Josephus mentions that Herod Antipas married one of the daughters of Aretas IV (*Antiquities*, 18.5). Scholars disagree over the name of this princess. Some of them suggest that it was *pš' l* (see for example al-Muheisen 1998, 35), and others that it was *š' wdt* (see for example Bowersock 1983, 5, 95). Schwentzel concluded that coins previously thought to commemorate the birth of a son Phasaël rather commemorate the marriage of a daughter *pš' l* to Herod Antipas and that the cornucopia and palm branch are depicted on these issues in celebration of this happy event (2010, 246–247).

Conclusion

The article presented a new Nabataean text inscribed in raised relief on a bronze tablet, and this represents an addition to the previously known Nabataean inscriptions.

The text, which is dated to the seventh year of the Nabataean king Aretas IV (3 BC), is particularly significant since it mentions the dedication of a water well/cistern (*gb my'*) by Aretas to the chief Nabataean god Dushara, who is described in the text as the God of Gaia. It is dedicated to Aretas, his first wife *hldw*, queen of the Nabataeans, and their daughter *pš' l*.

The paper included a commentary on the vocabulary and highlighted the relation between water and cult in Nabataea. It also provided some details about *hldw*, queen of the Nabataeans, as well as *pš' l*, her daughter with Aretas, allowing an updated family tree of the Nabataean royal house.

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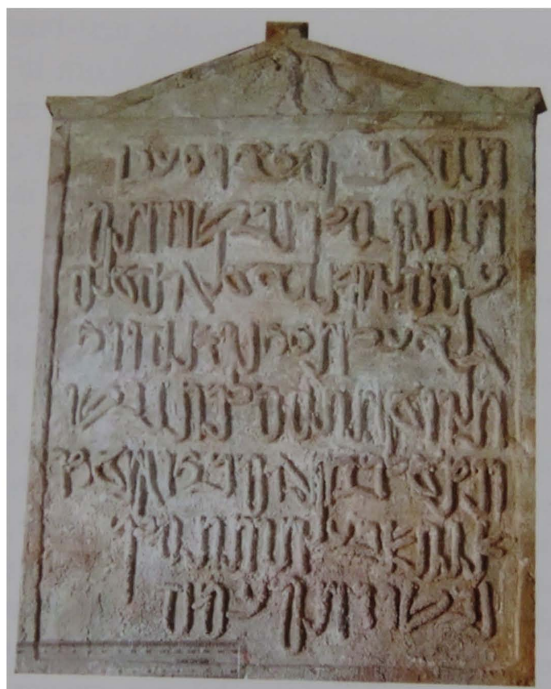
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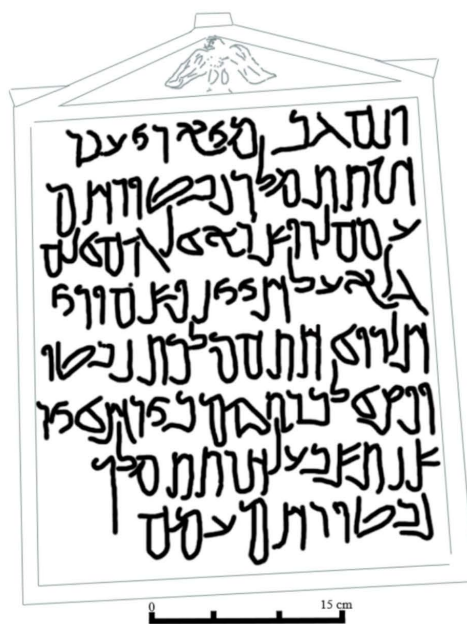
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Pl. 1: 1 – Photograph of the inscription (Barkay 2019, 50, Figure 8.10)

Pl. 1: 2 – Tracing of the inscription (drawn by the Z. al-Salameen)