New Dadanite Inscription from al-'Ula:
Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This article deals with a *Liḥyānat* inscription found in the province of al-'Ula (the capital of the Kingdoms of Dadan and Liḥyān ancient time). The importance of the inscription is that it is the first written inscription with the Dadanite script that mentions a Nabataean King (ʿObodat); which is extremely important in our understanding of the chronology of the Kingdoms that were established in this region, mainly the second part of the first millennium BCE. Therefore, this inscription adds a new dimension to our understanding of the end of the Kingdom of Liḥyān.

al-'Ula—ancient Dadan—in the northwest of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia provides us from time to time with archaeological evidence that adds to our information about human presence in it, and its interaction with its environment or its relations with the contemporary and surrounding societies.[1] Among these inscriptions,[2] one was found during an expedition specialized in cleaning one of the roads linking the old town with the archaeological site of Dadan (the capital of the Kingdoms of Dadan and Liḥyān) in the province of al-'Ula. After recording the coordinates of the site, the expedition handed it over to the Collections Department in the Royal Commission for al-'Ula Governorate.[3]

The importance of the inscription is in two observations: the first is the reference of the engraved script to two persons dead from plague, and the second is that the authors of the inscription (fourth and fifth lines) dated it to the Year 11 of the rule of the Nabataean King ('Obodat). In addition, it is the first written inscription with the Dadanite script that mentions a Nabataean king, and this is extremely important when we try to understand the chronology of the Kingdoms established in this region, mainly the second part of the first millennium BCE. This inscription may add a new dimension to our understanding of the end of the Kingdom of Liḥyān.

It is known that three of the Nabataean Kings bore the name "'Obodat" (see Table below), two of them ('Obodat I[4] and 'Obodat II) ruled less than ten years, 'Obodat I ruled ten years, and 'Obodat II most likely 3–4 years. Thus, the inscription dates back to 'Obodat III (30–9 BCE).

Name of the King	Years of Ruling	Duration
'Obodat I	95–85 BCE	10 years
'Obodat II	62/61–59 BCE	3–4 years
'Obodat III	30–9 BCE	21 years

Table showing the reigns of the three kings.

During the reign of 'Obodat III, the Roman campaign led by the Roman commander Aelius Gallus was carried out against southern Arabia (Sheba) in the years 25–24 BCE.[5] He provided them with logistical and military support. The logistical support represented in overcoming the difficulties and obstacles on the ground, by allowing the Roman army led by Aelius Gallus to pass through lands belonging to the Nabataean Kingdom, and with a good reception for the army from the governors of the provinces and areas they passed through, such as the reception of the governor of one of the southern regions, called al-Ḥaretat, who is a relative of 'Obodat III. Moreover, 'Obodat III created the appropriate place for the establishment of military camps for this army. As for the military support, 'Obodat III provided the Roman army with a military band of up to one-thousand men.

Despite the support provided by 'Obodat III to the Romans, the classic historians of that period such as Josephus and Strabo, described him as lazy and indolent, and that he did not pay any attention to public and military affairs.[6]

The important question here is: Were the writer(s) of this inscription, written in the late Dadanite script, and dated to the period of the rule of a non-local ruler, "Nabataean" King, were they Nabataeans or Lihyanite? If they were Nabataeans, why did they write in the Dadanaitic script,[7] and if they were from Liḥyān, why did they date it with a period of a non-local king?

There is no doubt that the definite answer is not clear to us now, but if we take into account the four personal names mentioned in this inscription, which are: *ᶜbdlh*, *wrdh*, *ᵓrš*, and *ᵓb*, or its vocabulary, such as *ẖldw* and *ṭᶜn*; we will find that personal names, with the exception of "*wrdh*", have appeared in both Nabataean and Dadanite inscriptions. As for the two terms, *ẖldw* and *ṭᶜn*, we have not recorded them, until now, except in the Dadanite inscriptions (see Fig. 1). Therefore, the probability that the writers are from Liḥyān is more likely; and if that was the case, then why did they date the inscription to the Nabataean King?

In fact, their date with the Nabataean King indicates that the Nabatean domination of the region was not as we expected, that it was during the time of the Nabataean King al-Ḥareṯat IV. This inscription reflects that the Nabataean domination dates back to an earlier period around late first quarter of the first century BCE.[8] Perhaps this removes the belief that a political vacuum in the region preceded the arrival of the Nabataeans.

As we indicated above that this inscription sheds light on the stage of Nabataean political control over al-'Ula (Liḥyān). We would like to draw attention that we were able—in the ninth season of our work in al-'Ula—to find a rectangular stone bearing two inscriptions, the left part was broken (see Fig. 2). The first nicely engraved in international Aramaic which indicates, in our view, the ability and the knowledge of its scribe, consisting of four lines. The second is poorly written Lihintic inscription, which suggests that it might have been squeezed and added later.[9] The importance of the Aramaic inscription historically is in two things, first that the Nabataean Kingdom dates back to the third century BCE, if not earlier, and not to the second century BCE as we had believed. Second, the scribe preferred to write their inscription in Aramaic, not Nabataean, because the latter had not spread in the area yet. The Aramaic inscription is read as follows:

1. *r g ᶜ b r ᶜ m r w   b r s l m*
2. *w n t n w   b r   b g r w w ᵓ ṣ (d q w)*
3. *ᶜ m   g r t l ḏ š r ᵓ   ᵓ l h   n b (ṭ w)*
4. *b y w m t*[10] *ḥ rṯ t m l k n b ṭ w*

rgᶜ son of *ᶜmrw* son of *slm* and *ntnw* son of *bgrw*, they offered! with *grt*! to *dšrᵓ*, the god of the Nabataeans, in the days (in the rule) of *ḥrtt* King of Nabataean.

The Inscription
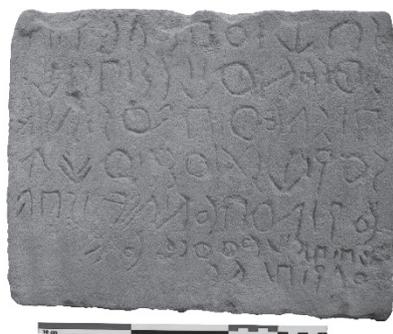
(Fig. 1)

1. $n\,f\,s/^c\,b\,d\,l\,h\,/b$

2. $n/\,w\,r\,d\,h/\,w\text{-}\,^{\circ}\,r\,\check{s}/\,b\,n/^{\circ}$

3. $b/\,h\,l\,d\,w/\,b\text{-}\,\d{t}\,^c\,n/\,b\,n\,h$

4. $n\,^c\,y/\,s\,n\,t/^c\,\check{s}\,r/\,w\text{-}\,^{\circ}\,\d{h}$

5. $d\,y\,/\,l\text{-}\,^c\,b\,d\,h\,/\,m\,l\,k\,/\,n\,b\,\d{t}$

6. $^{\circ}\,b\,/b\,n\,/r\,\d{h}\,d\,w\text{-}\,w\,r\,d\,\text{«}d\text{»}\,h$

7. $^c\,l\,y\,/\,b\,\times\,h\,m$

Tomb of *ᶜbdlh* son of

wrdh and *ᵓrš* son of *ᵓb*

(who) died of the plague. Build it! (the tomb)!

nᶜy, (in) the year ten and one

from the rule of *ᶜbdh* the King of Nabṭ

ᵓb son of *rḫd* and *wrdh*

on their children!

First line: includes two words, the first is the masculine singular noun *nfs,* "grave", known in the Dadanite inscriptions,[11] Palmyra[12] and Safaitic.[13] Followed by *ᶜbdh*, which is a compound personal name, meaning "slave, servant of God". It was mentioned in the Dadanite inscriptions,[14] Sabaean, Minaean,[15] and in Thamudic and Safaitic.[16] As for Nabataean, it came with a similar formula as *ᶜbdlhy*.[17]

Second line: consists of three personal names separated by *bn* "son of"; the first is the simple name *wrdh*, "the rose, the flower", known in Syriac;[18] *wrd* and *wrdw* two similar personal names recorded in Safaitic inscriptions and Nabataean.[19] Followed by *ᵓrš* another simple personal name,[20] recorded in this form in Dadanite inscriptions[21] and other ancient Arabic inscriptions.[22] Finally, the personal name *ᵓb* sometimes comes as an attribute of the deity.[23] This form was known in the Safaitic inscriptions and Minaean inscriptions.[24]

Third line: The reading of this line consisting of three words is good, except for the last word, which we read with caution *bnh*.[25] It is beginning with the verb *ḫldw* "(they) died". It appears in this form in Dadanite inscriptions in the past singular at least three times.[26] This is followed by the word *b ṭ ᶜ n*, which is a masculine singular noun, preceded by the preposition *b*, meaning "the plague" attested several times in the Dadanite inscriptions.[27] Finally, comes the perfect feel singular maculine "*bnh*", meaning "build it, create it", which we find in this form in the Dadanite inscriptions[28] and in a number of other Semitic inscriptions, such as Ammonite, International Aramaic, Nabataean, the Old Testament, and the Palestinian Aramaic dialect.[29] It also was mentioned as: *bnᵓ*, in Akkadian.[30]

Fourth line: with the exception of the first word, the reading and interpretation of this line is correct. The first word we considered as the personal name read as *nᶜy*, which is only known in this form in Safaitic inscriptions.[31] It is followed by the feminine singular noun *s n t* (س ن ت), meaning "year", and the number *ᶜšr w ᵓḥdy*, a number recorded several times in Dadanite inscriptions.[32]

Fifth line: This three-word line begins with the name *ᶜbdh*, preceded by the letter (*l*), which means "in ruler, in the time of". It is noticeable that this simple personal name is never recorded, as far as we know, in Nabataean inscriptions, where we found it as (*ᶜbdt*). In any case, the personal name appears in Dadanite and in Safaitic,[33] but it is an uncertain reading. Followed by the noun *m l k* and the people name in Dadanite form (without the *waw*) *nbṭ*, "the Nabataeans".

Sixth and seventh lines: In these two lines we encountered a problem in reading them and interpreting them satisfactorily. The reason is that they were either added later, or that the scriber was forced, due to space constraints, to reduce the size of their letters. Besides, this part of the stone is not well prepared. Our initial reading of them is as follows: *1- ᵓb/ bn/ rḥd w wrdh, 2- ᶜly/ b×hm*: *ᵓb son of rḥd* and *wrdh* on their children!

(Fig. 2) International Aramaic inscription from the religious center in Dadan.

Endnotes

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1 For further information, see A. Alsuhaibani, *L'architecture à Dédan: Étude analytique et comparative* (PhD, Université de la Sorbonne, Paris 1, 2015).

2 The French National Research Center for Scientific Research and the Royal Commission for al-ʼUla team has conducted a project to excavate the archaeological site of Dadan. This project included a survey of the mountain adjacent to the site from the eastern side, in which more than 400 inscriptions were written in different scripts, most of which are Minaean and Dadanite (F. Kootstra, and I. Rossi, "Report on the inscriptions from the survey", in A. Rohmer, *Alsuhaibani and Lesguer, The Dadan Archaeological Project, Report on the first field season 2020* (unpublished), 329.

3 The tidiness and cleaning team of the Royal Commission for al-ʼUla was headed by Mr. Mishaal Al-Balawi, Site Management Sector.

4 We cannot rule out that the inscription could date back to the time of ʿObodat I, but since the years of his reign are not yet confirmed, we believe that it is safer to date the inscription to ʿObodat III.

5 There are many reasons and factors that scholars and researchers have put forward to justify the Roman campaign. Some say that it is a strategic motive. The location of the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula attracted Rome to control the region. While others confined it to economic motives represented in controlling the incense route. S. al-Theeb, *alḥmlt alrūmaniyyah alūlāʾ ʿālʾ Janūb ġarb šabh alJazirat alʿarabiyyah, in Qàràat* (King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 2015), 39-50. We do not rule out that these two motives were among the motives which encouraged Rome to take the Nabataeans request in account to carry out the campaign.

6 Strabo, *The Geography*, Translated by H.L. Jones (London, 1930), 357.

7 We should point out that the relationship between the Lihyanites and the Nabataeans is still ambiguous, despite Liḥyān reputation inside and outside the Arabian Peninsula during the second half of the first millennium BCE, but they never yet mentioned in any Nabataean inscription.

8 This new evidence that the Nabataean presence in the region dates back to an earlier period than we think, contrary to what Rohmer and Charloux mentioned in their article. J. Rohmer, G. Charloux, 'From Lihyān to the Nabataeans: Dating the End of the Iron Age in Northwest Arabia', *PSAS* 45 (2015), 312.

9 A detailed study of these two inscriptions will be published in the near future; we would suggest this reading of the poorly written Lihanitic inscription:

ʿm r   b n   s l m   w n t n   b n . . .   w s l m

m l k   n b ṭ!   w .... ʿmr son of slm and ntn son of … King of Nabataean….

10 The reading of this word is *b-gwmt*. Since we did not find the correct interpretation for it, we suggested the above reading. Therefore, it could read as *rg^C* son of *^{C}mrw* son of *slm* and *ntnw* son of *bgrw*, they offered! with *grt*! to *dšrᴐ* , the God of the Nabataeans, in *gwmt* (place name) (in the time of) *ḥrtt* King of Nabataean.

11 A. Jaussen, R. Savignac, *Mission Archéologique en Arabie* (Paris, 1909–1914), insc no. 384:1; H. al-Qudrah, *Dirāsah muʿjamiyyah li-alfāẓ al-nuqūš al-liḥyaniyyah fî iṭār al-lughāt al-sāmiyyah al-janūbiyyah*. (Unpublished MA thesis, Irbid, Jamiʿāt al-Yarmūk, 1993), 134.

12 *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, (Pars 2. Tomus I. *Inscriptiones Aramaicas Continens* (Paris, 1889), ins. no. 4597: 1.

13 A. Jallad, *An Outline of the Grammar of the Safaitic Inscriptions* (Leiden, 2015), 330.

14 H. Abu-al Hassan, *Qirāʾah gadīdh līkitabāt laḥyyāniyyah min Ǧebel ʿakmāh bimanṭiyqāt al-ʿula* (ar-Riyāḍ, 1997), ins. nos. 78:1, 117: 1, 142:1; Díez, María del Carmen Hidalgo-Chacón, *Die theophoren Personennamen in den dadanischen Inschriften* (Marburg, 2013), 209.

15 G. Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions* (Toronto, 1971), 400; S. al-Said, *Die Personennamen in den minaischen Inschriften* (Wiesbaden, 1995), 133.

16 M. Shatnawi, *Die Personennamen in den Thamudischen Inschriften: Eine lexikalisch-grammatische Analyse in Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (Ugarit-Forschungen, Band: 34, 2003), 719; E. Littmann, *Safaitic Inscriptions* (Leiden, 1943), ins. no. 271.

17 A. Negev, *Personal Names in the Nabatean Realm* (Jerusalem, 1991), 47.

18 L. Costaz, *Dictionnaire Syriaque - Français, Syriac - English Dictionary* قاموس سرياني – عربي (Beirut, 1963), 82. The word is also attested in other Sematic writings, see J. Jongeling, K. Hoftijzer, *Dictionary of the North–West Semitic Inscriptions* (Leiden, 1995), 298. We draw attention that some may consider the personal name derived from the root *w r d*, which is known in Arabic, and with several meanings in the Sabian inscriptions, including: "go down to a place, fall (rain)". Beeston A. Beeston, M. Ghul, W. Müller, J. Ryckmans (1982), *Sabaic Dictionary* (English–French–Arabic), (Louvain la-Neuve: 1982), 162. It is also known in Safaitic as "to go to water, to go down". V. Clark, *A Study of New Safaitic Inscriptions from Jordan* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1980), 762; al-Jallad, *An Outline of the Grammar of the Safaitic*, 353. Thus, it means "warrior, rain".

19 Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names*, 640; A. al-Manaser, *Ein Korpus neuer safaitischer Inschriften aus Jordanien* (Berlin, 2008), ins. no. 384; in Nabataean see Negev, *Personal Names*, 25.

20 This personal name could be a simple name derived of the Phoenician verb "*Arš*" would, seek, ask". R. Tomback, *Comparative Semitic Lexicon of the Phoenician and Punic Languages* (New York, 1974), 33, known as well in Ugaritic. G. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome, 1965), 215. So, it means "willing, seeker", or a personal name contains an element of deity, since *Arš* is a Phoenician deity. F. Benz, *Personal Names in the Phoenician and Punic Inscriptions* (Rome, 1972), 276. For more parallel see al-Theeb, *Nuqūš Taymāʾ al-ʾarāmiyyah* (ar-Riyāḍ, 2007), 95-96; al-Theeb, *Mudawwanat al-nuqūš al-nabaṭiyyah fī al-mamlakah al-ʿarabiyyah as-saʿūdiyyah* (ar-Riyāḍ, 2010), 562.

21 Abu al-Hasan, *Qirāʾah gadīdh līkitabāt laḥyyāniyyah*, ins. nos. 26: 1, 187; Abu al-Hasan, *Nuqūš laḥyyāniyyah min manṭiyqāt al-ʿulā: dirāsat taḥlīliyyah muqārnah* (Ar-Riyād, 2002), insc no. 228: 1, 247: 1; Jaussen, Savignac, *Mission Archéologique*, ins. nos. 60:1, 131:1,1, 161:1, 187:1, 248:1, 384:1

22 Such as Sabaeans (N. al-ʿAnazī, ,*Kitābāt ʿarabiyyah qadīmah min jabal kūkab: dirāsah muqāranah*. (Unpublished PhD thesis, Riyadh, *jāmiʿat al-malik saʿūd*, 1004), ins. no.125, Minaean (al-Said, Die Personennamen, 56), Thamudic (Shatnawi, Die Personennamen, 644), and in Safaitic (M. Ababneh, *Neue Safaitische Inschriften und deren bildliche Darstellungen* (Berlin, 2005), ins. nos. 761, 840; al-Manaser, *Ein Korpus neuer safaitischer Inschriften* nos. 11, 279). It is a common name in the texts of *Qaryat al-Faw*. Abu al-Hasan, *Qirāʾah gadīdh līkitabāt laḥyyāniyyah*, 110.

23 For more on this type of personal names, see H. Hayajneh, *Die Personennamen der qatabanischen lnschriften* (Hildesheim, 1998), 53-63; al-Said, *Die Personennamen*, 52-55.

24 For the Safaitaic see Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names*, 8; for the Minaean see al-Said, *Die Personennamen*, 52.

25 Some would prefer to read this word and the following as: *b n   h ᶜ n y*, which means: "in the month of *Cny*". See F. Kootstra, 'Dadanite *brʾy* as referring to a local Calendar?', *SOAS* 38, (2020), 25-50. This reading in our view is hard to be used in this inscription. Mainly, if we took into account that "*bn*" as preposition "from" never attested in Lahinitic dialect. Therefore, we suggested the reading above.

26 Jaussen, *Mission Archéologique*, ins. no. 59: 2; W. Caskel, *Lihyan und Lihyanisch: Arabeitsgmeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein- Westfalen, Geistes-wissenschaften, Heft* 4 (Kőln, 1954), ins. no. 90.

27 Jaussen, *Mission Archéologique*, ins. no. 59: 2; Caskel, *Lihyan und Lihyanisch*, ins. no. 90:2; Abul-Hasan, *Nuqūš laḥyyāniyyah min manṭiyqāt al-ʿulā*, ins. no. 210:3.

28   H. al-Qudrah, *Dirāsah muʿjamiyyah li-alfāẓ al-nuqūš al-liḥyaniyyah fī iṭār al-lughāt al-sāmiyyah al-janūbiyyah* (Unpublished MA thesis, Irbid, Jamiʿāt al-Yarmūk, 1993), 79.

29   For more parallel see S. al-Theeb, *Muʿgam al-mufrdāt al-Arāmiyyah alqādima: dirāsat mūqārnāh* (ar-Riyāḍ, 2006), 51-52; S. al-Theeb, *al-Muʿgam an-nabaṭī* (ar-Riyāḍ, 2014), 86-87.

30   Ignace Gelb, *Glossary of Old Akkadian* (Chicago, 1957), 97.

31   Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names*, 595.

32   For the first (*ʿšr*) see Caskel, *Lihyan und Lihyanisch*, ins. no. 86: 3, and for the second (*ʾḥdy*) see al-Qudrah, *Dirāsah muʿjamiyyah li-alfāẓ al-nuqūš al-liḥyaniyyah*, 67; Caskel, *Caskel, Lihyan und Lihyanisch*, ins. no. 26: 4, A. Jamme, *Miscellanées d'ancient arabe*, V (Washington, DC, 1974), ins. no. 2a.

33   Abu al-Hasan, *Nuqūš laḥyyāniyyah min manṭiyqāt al-ʿulā*, ins. nos. 315: 2, 316, 319: 2; Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names*, 401.