

New Nabataean and Thamudic Inscriptions from Al-Manhal Site, Southwest Sinai

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Abstract

This research focuses on studying a number of Nabataean inscriptions and one Thamudic inscription from the site of Al-Manhal. The site was discovered by the author in Al-Ramlah area, southwest Sinai, and he called it Al-Manhal, as it is on a lower level than its surrounding, making it a natural basin in which torrential water collects after rain, which made it a destination for people to drink and collect water. On southern rocky slopes there are inscriptions next to petroglyphs. This study includes 18 Nabataean inscriptions and one Thamudic inscription. The study aims to publish and analyze the inscriptions.

Keywords

Sinai, Rock Art, Nabataean inscriptions, Thamudic inscriptions, Al-Manhal.

Introduction

Sinai Peninsula lies in the north-eastern corner of Egypt covering an area of 61,000 km². The administrative Governorate of South Sinai occupies about 28,400 km² of Sinai's total area, which is about 46.6% of the Peninsula. The terrain in South Sinai is an extreme ranging from high mountains, long valleys, cliffs, plateaus to coastal plains.¹ Sinai's importance is underlined by the link it creates as a land bridge from Mesopotamia, Levant, and Arabian Peninsula in the east, to Egypt in the west.²

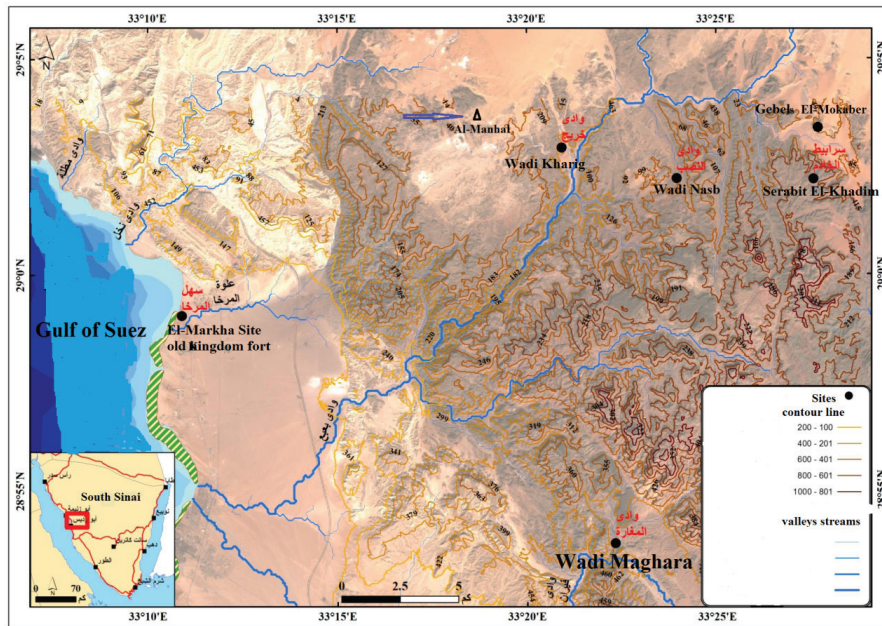
The Nabataean civilization is considered one of the most prominent civilizations in Sinai from the late Ptolemaic (Hellenistic) to the Roman period. Nabataeans are Arabs of origin, composed of several tribes that migrated (in the first millennium BCE) from the middle of the Arabian Peninsula to the area of Petra (currently Wadi Musa which is about 140 km north of Al-Aqaba port) and mingled with the late Edom phase of ancient cultures of nowadays Jordan.³

The Nabataean presence in Sinai started with the Hellenistic period, as corroborated in the Fortress of Wadi al-Mahgara and in Qasrawet which is considered one of the Nabataean religious and trade centers in Sinai. Two Nabataean temples were found here, they were built during the first century BCE. and were used all the way to the third century CE.⁴ Studies indicate that there are about 8678 inscriptions in South Sinai, 3853 of these inscriptions are Nabataean.⁵ Another study confirmed presence of 3920 Nabataean inscriptions in Sinai.⁶ Some researchers, author of this paper included, believe that the actual number is even double than the above-mentioned number, author of this paper conducted a number of archaeological surveys in Al-Ramlah area, which resulted in a

discovery of new sites with Nabataean inscriptions that were not mentioned before, in addition to unpublished inscriptions from known sites.⁷ This paper focuses on studying a number of Nabataean inscriptions and one Thamudic inscription from Al-Manhal site (المنهل) in southwest Sinai.

Al-Manhal Nabataean Inscriptions

Al-Manhal site (N 29° 04.36 E 33° 19.11) is located at the southwest end of Al-Ramlah area southwards of Jebel el-Tih.⁸ The inscriptions and petroglyphs are carved onto the southern rocky slopes of a sloping land in which torrential water collects after rain. The inscriptions are made in a simple, imprecise style, by tools, perhaps made out of flint, either by notching or tapping. Most of the inscriptions are worn out and eroded by weather conditions and floodwater. Recently folk writings have been sometimes made over the old writings.



Map 1. Al-Manhal site. The arrow indicates the location of the site, west of Wadi Kharig, southwest Sinai.



Fig. 1. The inscriptions on the rocky slopes in Al-Manhal site. (Photo, Mustafa Nour el-din)

Inscription No. 1 (Fig. 2a, 2b)

šlmt
Salmah or Salmt

Commentary

A feminine proper noun, an old Arabic name given to females, *Salmt* (سَلْمَة) is a soft-limbed woman. *Salmah* (سلمى): means healthy, pure, saved from perdition.⁹ The name was mentioned in Nabataean inscriptions in the form *šlymt* (سليمة),¹⁰ and it was also mentioned in Hebrew inscriptions in the form *šlmwt*.¹¹

Inscription No. 2 (Fig. 2a, 2b)

šlm Hdlt
Peace to Hudayl (?)

Commentary

The inscription begins with *šlm* which appears in a wide range of North-West Semitic inscriptions,¹² including Nabataean inscriptions and graffiti found throughout the Nabataean kingdom.¹³

šlm: is a noun in the masculine singular absolute, found in Nabataean and other Semitic inscriptions.¹⁴ There is a considerable number of Nabataean short inscriptions and graffiti which consist of names accompanied by the word *šlm*. The word can be translated as 'peace' 'security' or 'may be safe'.¹⁵

Hdlt Hudayl (?) Unconfirmed reading, proper name existed perhaps for the first time. It means a man with a skinny body; a tall strong horse; a low place in the desert or the little stream of water.¹⁶ Hudayl (هذيل) is also an Arabian tribe that originated in the Hejaz region of Arabian Peninsula; the Lihyan tribe is related to it.¹⁷

Inscription No. 3 (Fig. 2a, 2b)

šlm swpw
Peace to Swpw (?)

Commentary

A short commemorative inscription, its reading proposed above is unconfirmed reading the first word is to be read as *šlm* 'Peace'. The second word *šwpw* (صوب) is a simple masculine noun meaning 'right-not wrong'.¹⁸ The name was mentioned in the Sinai inscriptions.¹⁹

šlm 1

2

3



Fig. 2a, 2b. Photo and drawing of inscriptions Nos. 1, 2, 3. (Photo and drawing, Mustafa Nour el-din)

Inscription No. 4 (Fig. 3a)



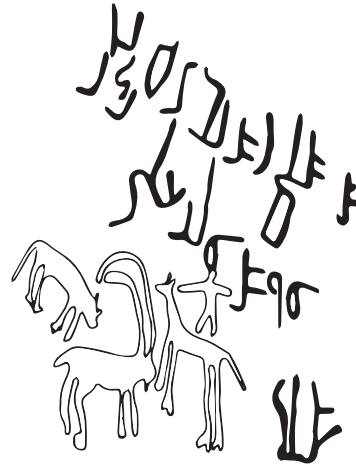
'wsw n
Awws n

Commentary

'wsw (أوس) is a simple proper name that existed in abundance in the Nabataean inscriptions.²⁰ It is one of the names of a wolf.²¹ 'Awws' means also 'a gift or a reward'. This name was known in Palmyrene inscriptions,²² also appeared in Aramaic,²³ Thamudic²⁴ and in the ancient Arabic inscriptions too.²⁵

n The letter 'n' is used at the end of a proper noun for the masculine plural form²⁶ or is a connected pronoun of the speaker.²⁷

Inscription No. 5 (Fig. 3a, 3b)



s slm Nsnkyh br
'ws 'lbaly btb
šlm

*Peace to Nashankeh son of Aws al-Baaly
good-peace.*

Commentary

A short commemorative inscription, the reading proposed above confirmed. The inscription is consistent with a drawing next to it of a hunting scene in which a man and a dog are besieging a deer and an ibex.

Nšnkyh: Nashankeh is a singular, masculine noun, for which no explanation has been inferred, or there is no knowledge of its source. Its appearance in the Nabataean inscriptions was limited to the Sinai inscriptions in which it was mentioned by about twenty-four times.²⁸ A name similar to its formulation has been discovered, but it is a feminine noun that was mentioned once in the inscriptions of al-Ula.²⁹

br 'son of' has been used frequently in Nabataean inscriptions,³⁰ and is here as a case of the masculine singular.

'ws'lbaly: Aws is a singular proper noun meaning gift, or perhaps meaning 'wolf'.³¹ It is also a name for the Qahtaniya tribe who lived in Yathrib after its emigration from Yemen due to the collapse of the Ma'rib Dam. The name is widespread in the Nabataean inscriptions in Sinai.³²

Al-Baali is a name consisting of the definite article 'Al' and the word Baali, which is a masculine plural noun means 'masters, leaders, lords'.³³ Name appeared in Arabic language dictionaries with multiple meanings, including a high land that is watered only by rain.³⁴ 'Baal' is also a known deity in ancient cultures of the Near East worshipped as a god of fertility or rain and storms.³⁵



Fig. 3a. Photo of inscription Nos. 4, 5, 19.

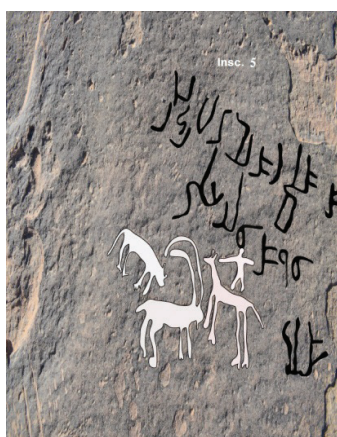


Fig. 3b. Photo and drawing of inscription No. 5. (Photo and drawing, Mustafa Nour el-din)

bṭb a noun (*ṭb*) in the masculine singular absolute preceded by a preposition (*b*), meaning 'for good, well'. It is known in Nabataean, as well as in other Semitic inscriptions.³⁶

Inscription No. 6 (Fig. 4a, 4b)



'mt 'lhy
Amat Allah

Commentary

'mt 'lhy: (أمة الله) Servant of God is a compound proper noun. *Amat* is an owned woman or a slave. The name was mentioned in the Nabataean and Semitic inscriptions.³⁷ Perhaps there was a sequel, another part of this inscription, but someone wrote his name, which removed the older inscription recently.

Inscription No. 7 (Fig. 4a, 4b)



šlm ʿwsw br Fsy bṭb
Peace to Aws son of Fassi good

Commentary

A short commemorative inscription, the reading proposed above is quite certain.

Fsy (فصي) Fassi is a well-known name and exists frequently in the Nabataean inscriptions. It is derived from the root *Fsi*, meaning 'to save and free'.³⁸

Inscription No. 8 (Fig. 4a, 4b)



šlm fsy br ḥgw
Peace to Fassi son of Hag

Commentary

Hgw (حاج). A simple proper name meaning a pilgrim or someone born during a pilgrimage.³⁹ The name is found in the Nabataean inscriptions.⁴⁰

2.9. Inscription No. 9 (Fig. 4a, 4b, 6)



šlm nʿm br ʿmyw
Peace to Naam son of amyw

Commentary

A short commemorative inscription, the reading proposed above is quite certain, *nam* (نعم) a simple proper name meaning good and spacious life.⁴¹ This name appears perhaps for the first time in Sinai inscriptions.

amyw (عميو) a simple proper noun meaning ‘to include’ or spread. It could also mean a person whom people raised to leadership, that is, they imitate him and force him to command them.⁴² This noun appeared in the Sinai inscriptions and in the Nabataean inscriptions in general.⁴³

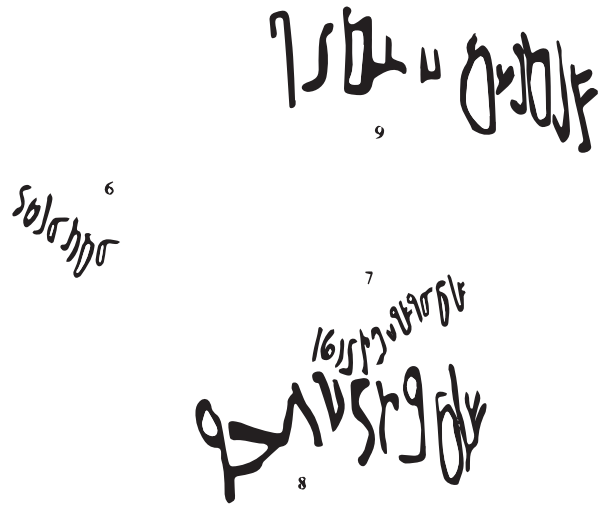


Fig. 4a, 4b. Photo and drawing of inscriptions Nos. 6, 7, 8, 9. (Photo and drawing, Mustafa Nour el-din)

Inscription No. 10 (Fig. 5a, 5b, 6)



šlm hn't šyfwf
Peace to Hanya the attractive?

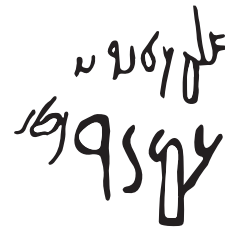
Commentary

A short commemorative inscription, the reading proposed above is not confirmed. The inscription pertains to a woman named Haniyeh-Hania.

hn't (هنية - هانئة) a feminine singular noun that derives from Hana, meaning healthy,⁴⁴ or is derived from the Arabic word Hana, which means gift.⁴⁵ The name appeared in Sinai Nabataean inscriptions in the form *hN'W/h NI* as a singular masculine form.⁴⁶ It exists in the inscriptions of the Arabian Peninsula in the same form in addition to *hN't/hN'T's* as a name in a singular feminine.⁴⁷

Šyfwf (شوفه - شيفاهه): An adjective derived from the name Haniyeh meaning an attractive lady, whom people look forward to see, or she shows herself to be seen by people. The name also means the woman who beautifies herself.⁴⁸

Inscription No. 11 (Fig. 5a, 5b, 6)



šlm d'bw br ʿmyw btb
Peace to (Wolf), son of amy good

Commentary

d'bw (ذئب) is a simple name meaning a wolf known in the Nabataean inscriptions. The name is still used to this day.⁴⁹ It was mentioned in many Nabataean Sinaitic inscriptions.⁵⁰

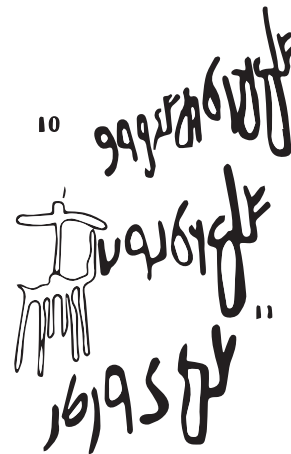
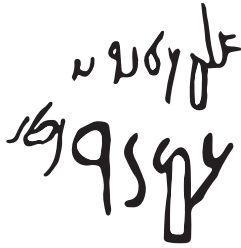


Fig. 5a, 5b. Photo and drawing of inscriptions Nos. 10, 11. (Photo and drawing, Mustafa Nour el-din)

Inscription No. 12 (Fig. 6)



šlm d'bw br ʿmyw bṯb
Peace to (Wolf), son of amyw good

Commentary

This inscription comes for the second time below the first inscription (mentioned above). The two inscriptions appear similar, which indicates that the author of both inscriptions is the same person. However, it is not known whether the two inscriptions were written on one occasion or not.



Fig. 6. Photo of inscriptions Nos. 9, 10, 11, 12.
(Photo, Mustafa Nour el-din)

Inscription No. 13 (Fig. 7)



šlm ʿlm br klb w fsy brh
Peace to alm son of Klb (dog) and his son Fsy

Commentary

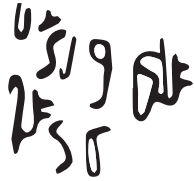
A short commemorative inscription, the reading proposed above is confirmed.

alm (عَلِمَ – Ghlem) is a simple proper noun meaning either ‘his lust for intercourse intensified’, or (Gholam – غُلَامٌ) ‘a boy aged between birth and start of puberty’. Sometimes this noun is used also for an adult man ‘follower or servant’.⁵¹ *lym - lymt* is widely attested in Nabataean inscriptions. The word usually designated servant or a slave.⁵² It appeared in inscriptions in both Sinai,⁵³ and Jordan.⁵⁴

Klb a simple proper noun which means a dog. Naming animals, such as lion, dog, and leopard is well known among the Semites. The purpose was to sow fear among the enemies, and to imitate the desirable characteristics of these animals. This name was frequently mentioned in the Nabataean inscriptions.⁵⁵

Brh masculine singular noun *br* with the relative pronoun *h*⁵⁶ means ‘his son’ *Fsy*.

Inscription No. 14 (Fig. 7, 8)



šlm Fny^c br 'ysw
Peace to Fneea, son of Ays

Commentary

A short commemorative inscription; the reading proposed above is confirmed.

Fnya (فنيح) is a generous rich man.⁵⁷ This name appears probably for the first time in a Nabataean inscription.

'ysw is a singular masculine noun, which means (أيس) *Ays* either an influenced person or a submissive one, or (إياس) *Iyas* a compensation or a gift.⁵⁸ The name was mentioned once in the Sinai inscriptions, in Al-Rakaiz site.⁵⁹ *Iyas al-Qadi*, i.e. 'Iyas bin Muawiyah bin Qurra al-Muzni al-Basri', was the most famous among those who bore the name. The name is still used until now.⁶⁰

2.15. Inscription No. 15 (Fig. 7, 8)



šlm fny^c br 'ysw
Peace to Fneea son of Ays

Commentary

A short commemorative inscription, its reading proposed above is confirmed. The inscription exists for the second time below the first inscription No. 14. Both inscriptions seem to belong to the same person.

Inscription No. 16 (Fig. 7, 8)



Y^cly br klb šlm
Yaaly son of klb (dog) good

Commentary

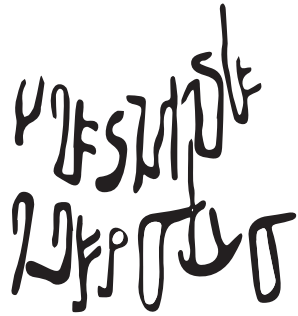
A short commemorative inscription; its reading proposed above is confirmed.

Yaly is a simple proper noun which means risen, or a person of high social status.⁶¹ The name is widespread in the inscriptions of Sinai,⁶² and it came in the inscriptions of the Rakayez site.⁶³



Fig. 7. Photo of inscriptions Nos. 13, 14, 15, 16. (Photo, Mustafa Nour el-din)

Inscription No. 17 (Fig. 8, 8a)



šlm hr īšū br 'l' qšṭw
Peace to ḥarish, son of Aala qastw



Fig. 8a. Photo of inscription No. 17.
 (Photo, Mustafa Nour el-din)

Commentary

A short commemorative inscription; its reading proposed above is confirmed.

ḥrīšū (حَرِيشُ) is a simple personal name, that exists in other Nabataean inscriptions,⁶⁴ in the ancient Arabic inscriptions *ḥarsh* حَرَش means ‘one who hunts lizards’.⁶⁵

'l' qšṭw (أعلا قسطو) *Aala* means higher or rises, *qšṭw qastw* means ‘justice—loftiness and greatness’.⁶⁶ The name here could mean ‘very fair man’. *Kastw* was mentioned before in the inscription No. 599 from Wadi Mokatab.⁶⁷

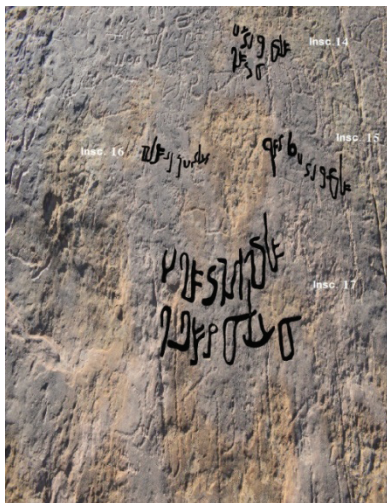


Fig. 8. Photo and drawing of inscriptions Nos. 14, 15, 16, 17. (Photo and drawing, Mustafa Nour el-din)

Inscription No. 18 (Fig. 9)



šlm hr īšū
Peace to ḥarish

Commentary

A short commemorative inscription; its reading proposed above is confirmed.



Fig. 9. Photo of inscription No.18.
 (Photo, Mustafa Nour el-din)

Al-Manhal Thamudic Inscription

Al-Manhal site has only one Thamudic inscription which belongs to the South-Semitic language related to Arabic, known from pre-Islamic inscriptions carved on stones in regions stretching between the Arabian Desert and Sinai. Thamudic script is considered a part of the northern Arabian languages.⁶⁸

Inscription No. 19 (Fig. 10)



This inscription can be read from right to left, or from left to right:

The reading from left to right:

Zn ʿbn

This camel of a huge body

Commentary

Zn or *Z* is a demonstrative noun for a masculine singular.⁶⁹ It was mentioned abundantly in the Thamudic inscriptions in Ha'il.⁷⁰

abn camel of a huge body.⁷¹ The representations of camels,⁷² appeared frequently in the Thamudic rock art, in inscriptions as well as in drawings. Camel was known by many descriptive names, in relation to its age, size or sex.⁷³

abn also mentioned a Thamudic proper name in Wādī Ġudayid, Aqaba Governorate, Jordan.⁷⁴

The reading from right to left:

Nr ʿnz

We see a goat

anz Goat, was mentioned as a Thamudic proper name in Ġabal al-Ḥuraybah in al-Ula Oasis.⁷⁵

This inscription is Thamudic script Group E, or what is known as Tabuk script.⁷⁶ Tabuk script spread in northern Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Sinai since the first century BCE to the fourth century CE.⁷⁷



Fig. 10. Photo of inscription No. 19.
(Photo, Mustafa Nour el-din)

Discussion

The site of al-Manhal is believed to be a resting place to which caravans resorted during rainy seasons in winter and spring, because they were able to find water and pasture. This hypothesis could be supported by a large number of camel scenes next to inscriptions. Some of the image depicted camels even with loads on their backs.

The site is located on a caravan route that led from Wadi al-Homr via al-Ramlah Plateau, where the caravans used to stop after about a daily walking distance. Then they might continue via Wadi al-Khabouba towards al-Markha Plain, and from there along the eastern shore of the Gulf of Suez all the way to the entrance into Wadi Feiran. In this valley were several Nabataean communities, such as Wadi Ajla, Gebel Serbal,⁷⁸ tell Maḥrad,⁷⁹ and near St. Catherine.⁸⁰ The caravan route continues in the Wadi Feiran eastwards to Wadi Kid (الكيد) and Nabq (نبق), where the route possibly crossed the

Gulf of Aqaba and reached the Arabian Peninsula,⁸¹ or continued northeastern direction to Ayla.⁸²

The inscriptions contain 20 proper names. Among the inscriptions there are three compound names and sixteen are simple proper names, there are 17 masculine names and three feminine (Table 1). In addition to that, the inscriptions also contained some terms and words organized in vocabulary (Table 2).

Inscription No. 19 is a Thamudic inscription. In Egypt, Thamudic inscriptions so far found in al-Muwaiḥ, two inscriptions in Tell al-Yahudiya, one inscription in Saft al-Henna, one inscription in Gebel Naqus near al-Tur, one inscription from Wadi Mukatab,⁸³ two inscriptions in Wadi al-Gimal, and one inscription from Wadi Homr.⁸⁴

The Thamudic inscription is a part of ancient Northern Arabic writings. They were called Thamudic as the word appeared in some inscriptions in the Assyrian Annals, the Sabaeans, and the Safaitic inscriptions.⁸⁵ Thamudic inscriptions belong to a South-Semitic language related to Arabic, known from pre-Islamic inscriptions carved on stones in regions stretching between the Arabian Desert and Sinai. Thamudic script is considered a variant of the south Arabian one, it was very close to two neighboring languages: Safaitic and Lihyanite.⁸⁶ Winnett divided these inscriptions into four groups A, B, 'C-D' and E.⁸⁷ The A and B groups represent the early Thamudic writing from the period between the eighth century BCE and the second century BCE. The group 'C-D' represents the Thamudic script that was used in Hijaz only in the period between the second century BCE and the third century CE. Group E, known also as Tabuk script, spread in northern Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Sinai in the period between the first century BCE and the fourth century CE.⁸⁸

Conclusion

This research focuses on the results of the archaeological survey conducted by the author in al-Ramlah area of southwestern Sinai, which resulted in the discovery of a number of new sites that are being published gradually. This study provided important new data on the Nabataean presence in Sinai, it included 18 Nabataean inscriptions and one Thamudic inscription from al-Manhal site. The study confirms the widespread of sites with Nabataean inscriptions in Sinai. All inscriptions in the site are of the undated commemorative type. Their sentence structure is simple, starting with the word peace, i.e. peace to. These inscriptions can be dated by the method of writing by comparable cases to the second and the third century CE. The Thamudic inscription belongs to the Tabuk script.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to Mr. Suleiman Hamad from al-Hamada tribe for guiding me to inspect the site. My sincere thanks are to my colleagues Dr. Fayez Anwar (Damanhur University), Dr. Mahmoud Salem Ghanem and Dr. Islam Sami Abdel Basset (Supreme Council of Antiquities) for the fruitful scientific discussions about the relevant inscriptions.

Table 1. Proper names mentioned in the inscriptions from Al-Manhal site.

Insc. Number(s)	Arabic	English	Nabataean	N
2	هذيل	Huthayl	<i>h₁dl</i>	1
3	صوب	Sowp	<i>swpw</i>	2
4-7	أوس	Aws	<i>'wsw</i>	3
1	سلمى - سُلْمَة	Slmah	<i>šlmt</i>	4
5	نشنكيه	Nashankeh	<i>nšnkyh</i>	5
5	أوس البعلي	Aws al-Baaly	<i>'ws'lb^cly</i>	6
6	أمة الله	Amat Allah	<i>'mt'lhy</i>	7
7-8-13	فصي	Fassi	<i>fsy</i>	8
8	حاج	Hag	<i>h₁gw</i>	9
9	نُعم	Naam	<i>n^cm</i>	10
9-11-12	عمي	Amyo	<i>^cmyw</i>	11
10	هنية - هانئة	Hanya	<i>hn't</i>	12
11-12	ذئب	Zaab (Wolf)	<i>d'bw</i>	13
13	غلام	Alm	<i>^clm</i>	14
13-16	كلب	Klb (dog)	<i>klb</i>	15
14-15	فنيح	Fneea	<i>fny^c</i>	16
14-15	أيس - إياس	Ays	<i>'ysw</i>	17
16	يعلي	Yaaly	<i>Y^cly</i>	18
17-18	حريش	Hresho	<i>hrīšū</i>	19
17	أعلى قسط	Aala Kastw	<i>'l' qš^tw</i>	20

Table 2. Terms and vocabulary mentioned in the inscriptions from Al-Manhal site.

Insc. Number(s)	Arabic	English	Nabataean	N
2-3-5-7-8-9-10-11-12-13-14-15-16-17-18	سلام	Peace of	<i>Slm</i>	1
5-7-8-9-11-12-13-14-15-16-17	ابن	Son of	<i>br</i>	2
5-7-11-12	بخير	Good	<i>bTb</i>	3
13	ابنه	His son	<i>brh</i>	4
13	واو العطف	and	<i>w</i>	5

Endnotes

- * Senior Researcher at the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Egypt; mostafaarchaeology@gmail.com.
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