

# REVIEWS

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## THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

MOHAMMED MARAQTEN:

*Altsüdarabische Texte auf Holzstäbchen. Epigraphische und kulturhistorische Untersuchungen.*

(Beiruter Texte und Studien 103.) 498 pp. Beirut: Orient Institut / Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2014. €98. ISBN 978 3 95650 034 3. doi:10.1017/S0041977X15000889

Epigraphic texts from ancient South Arabia can neatly be divided into two groups: on the one hand, there are inscriptions on solid materials such as stone, rock or metals (mostly bronze), written in a monumental script called *musnad*, and usually intended for public display, e.g. in temples, on buildings or on instruments. On the other hand, there are texts on wooden material, such as sticks or palm-leaf branches, incised in a minuscule script called *zabūr*, and used in private, legal or administrative communications. While texts of the first kind have been known since the very beginning of South Arabian epigraphy in the nineteenth century, the second kind have become known, and are being deciphered and studied, only during the last few decades. As the minuscule texts differ radically from the monumental ones in terms of content, they offer major new insights into the fields of grammar, lexicon, and phraseology of the South Arabian languages, and yield a wealth of information about the cultural history of ancient Yemen.

The book under review provides a selection of minuscule texts from the collection of the National Museum of Yemen, which houses more than 3,000 samples of this kind. In an extensive introduction, the author explores: the history of the discovery of the minuscule texts; writing materials; writers and their training; schools and archives; questions of authenticity; the palaeography of the minuscule script; and how dates are given in these texts. He further deals with the properties of letters, the social and economic history of South Arabia in the light of the minuscule texts, linguistic, legal and religious issues, and the role of women as portrayed by the texts.

The main chapter is the edition of 101 texts which are given the siglum ATHS plus a number. For each text, a photo, a drawing, a transcription, a translation, and an ample philological commentary are provided. The texts are arranged according to the following topics: private life and family (9 texts), irrigation (2), economy (30), law (15), religion and superstition (5), accountancy and administration (29), and schooling (11). They are all *editiones principes*, save one (ATHS 43) which was published by Yusuf Abdallah already in 1994. The appendix comprises indices and concordances as well as a bibliography and summaries in English and Arabic.

It goes without saying that in a still novel academic field such as the study of minuscule texts, it is not easy to arrive at uncontroversial results, and many open questions remain. For example, among the administrative texts there are many lists of names, sometimes accompanied by numerical symbols whose function is completely obscure: whether the persons mentioned had some kind of obligation or whether, on the contrary, they had rights to certain goods or resources is simply not known. Some of the legal texts, too, defy conclusive interpretations (i.e. ATHS 46, ATHS 49, ATHS 50, ATHS 51, ATHS 53, ATHS 56).

A few specific remarks: ATHS 32 reads *ḥms<sub>1</sub> khrn dbs<sub>1</sub> \*\*\*\*\** and is translated by “five skeps of honey (number) 50”. There are two problems here: *dbs<sub>1</sub>* might mean “honey”, but this is not certain as it might also refer to date-syrup (see A. Sima, *Tiere, Pflanzen, Steine und Metalle in den altsüdarabischen Inschriften*, Wiesbaden, 2000, 240 f.). The word *khrn*, attested here for the first time, is said in the commentary to denote “a measure of capacity, a skep, a beehive” or “a jar”. But this, too, is problematic: traditional Yemeni beehives are different from the old-time European wickerwork skeps (see J. Karpowicz, “Traditionelle Imkerei im Jemen”, in *Jemen: 3000 Jahre Kunst und Kultur des glücklichen Arabien*, München, 1987, 370 ff.). Besides, a basket is unsuitable for storing or transporting honey. It is not even certain that honey in ancient Yemen really came from beekeeping and not from harvesting it wild. So while *khrn* could indeed be some kind of measure of capacity, its interpretation as hive or skep is ruled out. Whether *dbs<sub>1</sub>* denotes honey or rather a fruit syrup is still open to debate. The short text ATHS 47, which runs *ʿls<sub>2</sub>rḥ bn zydl<sub>t</sub> ʿḥwnyn wʿḥw šbḥm*, is interpreted as a “document of fraternization”. In view of the brevity of the text, in the absence of any further formulae or information, and also considering that the surface of the stick is largely blank, I would suggest that the text is incomplete, a feature that has a parallel in the minuscule text Said 1 (see S.F. Al-Said and S. Weninger, “Eine unvollendete sabäische Urkunde”, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 15, 2004, 68–71). Although a verb *ʿḥw* “be allied to s.o.” is indeed attested in Sabaeen, an interpretation “ʿIls<sub>2</sub>raḥ, son of Zaydlāt, the Alyanite, and his brother Šabāḥum . . .” seems equally possible (if the spelling *ʿḥw* instead of *ʿḥw* is taken to be a minor clerical error). One text that shows only a name and a title (ATHS 64) is interpreted as a “visiting card”, yet the invention of the visiting card is associated with eighteenth-century European etiquette, which renders this interpretation quite unlikely (although I am not able to provide a better one). The word *ḥwlyn* is interpreted as “overseer, deputy”. However, with regard to the widespread use of the root *ḥwl* in South Arabian onomastics, the word could also refer to the tribal affiliation of the person. ATHS 90 is included in the subchapter on administrative texts, but as it is a wordlist it should be placed in the subchapter on school texts.

Maraqten’s book was largely finished in 2006 or 2007, but appeared only in 2014. Literature published after 2006 is therefore hardly ever quoted. It is especially regrettable that P. Stein’s two-volume work on the South Arabian sticks in the Munich collection, titled *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskel-inschriften auf Holzstäbchen aus der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in München* (Tübingen, 2010), which contains more than 200 edited samples, could not be taken into account by Maraqten.

All in all, the author has produced a substantial and most welcome contribution to South Arabian epigraphy. Scholars specializing in ancient South Arabia, as well as Semitists, can be grateful for this achievement.

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