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# *Notes on the language of the Hismaic Inscriptions and a re-reading of Line 4 of the Madaba Hismaic Inscription*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*One of the longest Hismaic inscriptions yet discovered comes from the region of Madaba, Jordan. It was published first in an Arabic article by Khraysheh in 2000 and was re-edited by Graf and Zwettler four years later. Both editions remark on the striking similarity in language and style between this text and Classical Arabic. Indeed, this inscription and a closely related text from Uraynibah West, also published by Graf and Zwettler in the same article, are among the best witnesses to the Arabic of this region during the Nabataean period. This article will offer a few remarks on the language of the Hismaic inscriptions and then provide a new reading of line 4 of the Madaba inscription, which had previously evaded satisfactory interpretation.*

## **Introduction**

One of the longest Hismaic inscriptions yet discovered comes from the region of Madaba, Jordan. It was published first in an Arabic article by Khraysheh in 2000<sup>2</sup> and was re-edited by Graf and Zwettler four years later.<sup>3</sup> Both editions remark on the striking similarity in language and style between this text and Classical Arabic. Indeed, this inscription, and a closely related text from Uraynibah West—also published by Graf and Zwettler in the same article—are among the best witnesses to the Arabic of this region during the Nabataean period. This article will offer a few remarks on the language of the Hismaic inscriptions, and then provide a new reading of Line 4 of the Madaba inscription, which had previously evaded satisfactory interpretation.

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Michael C. A. Macdonald and Jérôme Norris for their helpful comments and corrections on an earlier draft of this article. All mistakes are my own.

<sup>2</sup>F. al-Khraysheh, “An Arabic Inscription Written in Thamudic Scrip[t] from Jordan”, *Adumatu* 2 (2000), pp. 59–70.

<sup>3</sup>M. J. Zwettler and D. F. Graf, “The North Arabian ‘Thamudic E’ Inscription from Uraynibah West”, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 335 (2004), pp. 53–89.

## Part I: Notes on Hismaic chronology, morphology, and phonology

### *Hismaic, background and chronology*

Hismaic is the name of an Ancient North Arabian script used in the Ḥismā desert and its surrounding areas up to central Jordan. The script was first identified by Winnett,<sup>4</sup> which he labelled “Thamudic E” and later “Tabuki” Thamudic.<sup>5</sup> G. King undertook the full-scale study of this script in her 1990 dissertation,<sup>6</sup> following which it was renamed “Hismaic”, reserving the label “Thamudic” for Ancient North Arabian scripts that were not fully understood. Although some have correctly questioned the wisdom of this geographically based term, especially since a growing number of inscriptions, especially the longer ones, come from beyond the Ḥismā, it has become widely accepted as the name of this alphabet and so suggestions<sup>7</sup> to return to the label Thamudic E should be rejected.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Safaitic, there are no inscriptions in the Hismaic script proper that are dated to known events.<sup>9</sup> King summons some circumstantial evidence from anthroponyms attested in the corpus to suggest that the use of the Hismaic alphabet overlapped with the Nabataean period and its writers were within the kingdom’s sphere of influence.<sup>10</sup> The onomasticon contains several Nabataean basilophoric names, such as *ʿbdḥrtt* (KJC 272) /‘abdo-ḥāretat/ ‘servant of Aretas’;<sup>11</sup> *ʿbdʿbdt* /‘abdo-‘obodat/ ‘servant of Obodas’ (KJC 574).<sup>12</sup> A small number of bilingual Hismaic-Nabataean inscriptions further indicate that the two writing traditions were contemporaneous.<sup>13</sup> Thus, while it is entirely possible, and even likely, that the Hismaic inscriptions predate the Nabataean kingdom, they at least continue after its establishment into the first century BCE to the first century CE.

### *A few remarks on the language of the Hismaic Inscriptions*

In my work on the classification of the languages of the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions, I have argued that the Hismaic inscriptions attest a variety of Old Arabic belonging to the

<sup>4</sup>F. V. Winnett, *A Study of the Lihyanite and Thamudic Inscriptions* (Toronto, 1937).

<sup>5</sup>F. V. Winnett and W. L. Reed. *Ancient Records from North Arabia*. Near and Middle East (Toronto, 1970).

<sup>6</sup>G. M. H. King, *Early North Arabian Hismaic* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1990).

<sup>7</sup>Zwettler and Graf, “Uravnibah West”, pp. 57–58.

<sup>8</sup>See M. C. A. Macdonald “Reflections on the linguistic map of pre-Islamic Arabia”, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 11 (2000), pp. 28–79, on the nomenclature of the Ancient North Arabian scripts.

<sup>9</sup>The only dated inscription is MNM 3, from the Karak region, which states *snt kbnsqyrʿrbt*; the divisions of the words after *snt* are unclear so I have not posited word boundaries. Two texts in a mixed Safaitic-Hismaic hand are dated. The first, from northern Saudi Arabia, is dated to *snt ngʿ* (DHH 25), which provides no chronological information. The second is from southern Jordan, published by Z. al-Salameen, “A new Ancient North Arabian inscription with a reference to the Nabataean king Aretas”, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 22 (2011), pp. 215–218, and is likely to be dated to 40 CE.

<sup>10</sup>King, ‘Hismaic’, §8.A.

<sup>11</sup>Late Nabataean pronunciation in Greek transcription as Αβδοορθη = /‘abdo-ḥārtah/. See Y. E. Meïmaris, and I. Kalliope, *Inscriptions from Palaestine Tertia, Vol. 1b. The Greek Inscriptions from Ghor Es-Safi, Byzantine Zoora* (Athens, 2008), inscr. #21.

<sup>12</sup>Late Nabataean pronunciation in Greek transcription as Αβδοοβδδς = /‘abdo-‘obdah/. See P.-L. Gatier, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie XXI/2: Inscriptions de la Jordanie: Région centrale (Amman, Hesban, Madaba, Main, Dhiban)*, (Paris, 1986), inscr. #37.

<sup>13</sup>Hani Hayajneh, “A Preliminary Investigation of an Ancient North Arabian Invocation from the Madaba Region of Central Jordan”, in *Languages, Scripts and Their Uses in Ancient North Arabia. (Supplement to Volume 48 of the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies)*, (ed.) M. C. A. Macdonald (Oxford, 2018), pp. 95–100.

northern Old Arabic dialect continuum, which includes Nabataean Arabic and Safaitic.<sup>14</sup> This is rather clear from the longer inscriptions, such as the one discussed here, but even the shorter texts provide important linguistic facts in support of this classification. The Hismaic inscriptions constitute their own linguistic cluster within the northern Old Arabic dialect continuum; hence, the following paragraphs will outline some aspects of Hismaic phonology and morphology not discussed in King's dissertation.

The most striking aspect of Hismaic is its lack of a definite article, which a group of bilingual Hismaic-Nabataean inscriptions clearly illustrates.<sup>15</sup> A small minority of Safaitic texts lack the definite article as well. Since the article is an innovative feature in Semitic, Hismaic likely preserves the Proto-Arabic situation, while later dialects developed various forms of definite marking, *ha-*, *'al-*, *'am*, *'a-*, etc.<sup>16</sup>

Proto-Arabic preserved the triphthong of III-w/y roots and these survive in Safaitic: *r'y* [raʕaya] 'he pastured' and *'tw* [ʔatawa] 'he came'. Hismaic sometimes collapses the triphthong of III-w verbs to long vowel, perhaps /ā/: *d'* [daʕā] 'he invoked' < \*daʕawa,<sup>17</sup> but *r'y* [raʕaya] 'he pastured', paralleling the situation found in the Quranic Consonantal Text.

| Proto-Arabic          | Safaitic                          | Hismaic             | QCT              |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| *raʕaya 'he pastured' | <i>r'y</i> [raʕaya]               | <i>r'y</i> [raʕaya] | بئ [banē, banay] |
| *ʔatawa 'he came'     | <i>'tw</i> <sup>18</sup> [ʔatawa] | <i>d'</i> [daʕā]    | دعا [daʕā]       |

Like Classical Arabic, Hismaic distinguishes between an indicative and subjunctive verb: *ybk* 'he weeps'<sup>19</sup> vs. *ygzʕy* 'that he may fulfill'.<sup>20</sup> The final glide of the root is represented orthographically in the subjunctive while it is unrepresented in the indicative. This pattern of spelling indicates that the subjunctive ended in a consonantal glide while the indicative terminated in a long vowel, a fact that supports the following reconstruction:<sup>21</sup>

| Proto-Arabic          | Safaitic <sup>22</sup> | Hismaic                 | Classical Arabic |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Indicative: *yabkī    | <i>y d'</i> [yaʕʕī]    | <i>ybk</i> [yabkī]      | yabkī            |
| Subjunctive: *yagziya | <i>nngy</i> [nangeya]  | <i>ygzʕy</i> [yagzeʕya] | yagziya          |

<sup>14</sup>A. al-Jallad, "What Is Ancient North Arabian?", in *Re-Engaging Comparative Semitic and Arabic Studies*, (eds.) N. Pat-El and D. Birstiel (Wiesbaden, 2018), pp. 1–45.

<sup>15</sup>H. Hayajneh, "Ancient North Arabian-Nabataean Bilingual Inscriptions from Southern Jordan", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 39 (2009), pp. 203–222, shows that the author of one of these texts renders the Nabataean name *'bd l' yb* as *'bd yb* in Hismaic, lacking the *'l*-article.

<sup>16</sup>On this and the history of the definite article in Arabic, see al-Jallad, "What Is Ancient North Arabian?", pp. 10–16.

<sup>17</sup>This verb is sometimes reanalysed as a geminate, producing the form *d''*, perhaps [daʕʕaʕa].

<sup>18</sup>Most Safaitic inscriptions, however, merge III-w and III-y roots to the III-y class just as in modern dialects of Arabic.

<sup>19</sup>This is attested in a new Hismaic inscription from the Madaba region edited recently by Hayajneh, "Invocation from Madaba".

<sup>20</sup>Zwettler and Graf, "Uraynibah West".

<sup>21</sup>Note that vowels, both long and short, are not represented in Hismaic orthography, in any position.

<sup>22</sup>A. al-Jallad, "'Safaitic'", in *The Semitic Languages, 2nd edition*, (eds.) J. Huehnergard and N. Pat-El (London, 2019), p. 353.

Since this mood ending survived on verbs, it is reasonable to assume that the /a/ of the accusative survived on nouns as well, as no phonological erosion of this vowel occurred. No environments in which to detect such an ending, however, have presented themselves.

One inscription provides positive evidence for the survival of the nominative case. In a text recently published in J. Healey's *Festschrift* from the area of Wādī Ramm, M. C. A. Macdonald ingeniously recovered the vowels on the boundary of words based on the patterns in the loss of the glottal stop.<sup>23</sup> The inscription reads, following the *editio princeps*:

*l' bslm bn qymy d 'l gsm w dkrt-n lt w dkrt lt wśy'-n kll-hm*

'By 'bslm son of Qymy of the lineage of Gsm and may Allāt be mindful of us and may Allāt be mindful of all our companions'.

Macdonald noticed that the spelling of the second invocation, *dkrt lt wśy'-n kll-hm*, indicated that the glottal stop of what was originally *'šy'-n /ʔaśyāʔa-nā/* had disappeared, resulting in a homo-organic glide *w*. The value of the glide, in turn, shows that the previous word terminated in an *u*-vowel: *\*allātu ʔaśyāʔa-nā > allātu aśyāʔa-nā*. The word-boundary sequence *ua* was rendered with *w*.

While Macdonald proved the existence of a final *u* on Allāt, he did not offer an explanation as to its origin. He does point out, however, that the divine name Allāt is spelled *'ltw* in Nabataean inscriptions from this region,<sup>24</sup> but this only indicates that the Nabataean form terminated in a final *u*-class vowel as well. I have argued in length,<sup>25</sup> agreeing with the opinion of Diem,<sup>26</sup> that this final *-w*, conventionally termed Nabataean *wawation*, derives etymologically from the nominative case. While Arabic case inflection is neutralised in an Aramaic syntactic context, hence the non-inflection of such names in most of the Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions, the 'En 'Awdat Arabic inscription, written in the classical Nabataean script, exhibits a fully functioning case system.<sup>27</sup> In this light, I would suggest that the aforementioned Hismaic inscription provides further evidence for nominal case inflection in the Arabic of this region.<sup>28</sup>

The genitive case is attested once in a word-boundary position in the form of a homo-organic glide arising from the loss of the glottal stop.

<sup>23</sup>M. C. A. Macdonald, "Clues to How a Nabataean May Have Spoken from a Hismaic Inscription", in *Near Eastern and Arabian Essays Studies in Honour of John F. Healey*, (eds.) A. A. H. W. Curtis, M. al-Hamad and G. R. Smith, *Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement* 41 (Oxford, 2018), pp. 231–239.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>25</sup>A. al-Jallad, "One Wāw to Rule Them All: The Origins and Fate of Wawation in Arabic", in *Scripts and Scripture*, (eds.) F. M. Donner and R. Hasselbach (Chicago, forthcoming).

<sup>26</sup>W. Diem, "Die nabatäischen Inschriften und die Frage der Kasusflexion im Altarabischen", *ZDMG* 123 (1973), pp. 227–237.

<sup>27</sup>For the most recent edition of this text, fully explaining the case inflection, see al-Jallad, "One Wāw".

<sup>28</sup>What is more, this variety of Hismaic has clearly merged the interdental fricative *d* with *d*, suggesting a variety of Arabic that, on the one hand, preserved case inflection while on the other had lost at least the voiced interdental. Macdonald, "Clues", suggested that this text was written by an Aramaic speaker because of the loss of the interdental, but also gives the possibility that this could be an Arabic-internal change. Neither interpretation of course affects the status of the *w* at the end of *allāt* being a case ending.



CTSS 3:


l šhḥ bn wd dyl n'lt w dkrt lt kll rht ṣ{d}q

‘By Šhḥ son of Wd of the lineage of N’lt and may Allāt be mindful of every righteous kinsman’

The phrase dyl is spelled in all other circumstances as d’l. The use of the y indicates that the vowel of the relative pronoun was ī, which is expected considering that it is in apposition with the personal name following the preposition l-. In order to prove beyond a doubt the existence of inflection in this pronoun, however, we would require a similar spelling in a nominative context with w, which has not yet been attested. Yet it might be significant that Nabataean Arabic exhibits dw for the relative pronoun, e.g. *dwšr*’ [dū-šarē], which indicates that at least originally the Arabics of this region inflected the relative marker for case.

While the evidence is fragmentary, as can be expected from the purely consonantal script, it is consistent with the Arabic (and Proto-Semitic) case system, suggesting that nominal declension and the verbal moods remained intact in Hismaic.

Hismaic employs the bar with two circles, , to represent etymology \*g,<sup>29</sup> a particularity shared perhaps with some varieties of Thamudic C.<sup>30</sup> Knauf,<sup>31</sup> following Voigt,<sup>32</sup> has argued that the use of this glyph suggests the shift of \*[g] to either [ʒ] (ž in Voigt’s transcription and ǰ in Knauf’s) or [j] (y in Knauf’s transcription).<sup>33</sup> While there are unfortunately no bilingual Hismaic-Greek inscriptions to help determine the phonetic values of the Hismaic consonants, transcriptions of foreign personal names in this alphabet can inform our understanding of their realisation. Hismaic employs the  glyph to transcribe the Nabataean personal name *’bd’lgy*, spelled *’bdlg* (KJC 205) and perhaps an Aramaicised version *’bdgy* (Berard 1). The pronunciation of Nabataean *g* was certainly [g], as this phoneme is transcribed consistently with Greek Gamma, which in this period and region retained its original value as a voiced velar stop [g].<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the choice to render this phoneme with the Hismaic glyph  suggests that it was the closest approximate to that sound in the language. This is hard to imagine if it were truly realised as [ʒ]. If the reconstructions of Voigt or Knauf were true, one would rather expect the use of the <k>, <q> or even the <ḡ> glyphs to represent foreign [g]. This simple observation, I believe, supports the identification of the phonetic value of this sound as either [g], or perhaps a voiced palatal stop [j], but certainly not a sibilant or approximant.

<sup>29</sup>This value was first identified by E. A. Knauf, “Südsafaitisch”, *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 27 (1983), pp. 587–596.

<sup>30</sup>See the script chart in Macdonald, “Reflections”.

<sup>31</sup>E. A. Knauf, “Arabo-Aramaic and ‘Arabiyya: From Ancient Arabic to Early Standard Arabic, 200 CE–600 CE”, in *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu*, (eds.) A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx (Leiden & Boston, 2010), pp. 216–219.

<sup>32</sup>R. M. Voigt, “Notes on South Safaitic”, *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 28 (1984), pp. 311–314.

<sup>33</sup>Knauf, “Arabo-Aramaic” does not use IPA notation in his reconstruction of these phonemes so it is unclear from the article itself what their phonetic values must have been. Assuming that Knauf follows Voigt, as he states, it seems that ǰ is meant to represent the voiced palato-alveolar sibilant [ʒ]. I assume y, given on p. 219 is meant to represent the voiced palatal approximant [j]; this is the value given on p. 216.

<sup>34</sup>A. al-Jallad, “Graeco-Arabica I: The Southern Levant”, in *Arabic in Context: Celebrating 400 Years of Arabic at Leiden University*, (ed.) A. al-Jallad (Leiden, 2017), pp. 99–186, §3.6”

This observation is further supported by the spelling of tribal name *gśm* /gośam/, which occurs in both Safaitic (CSNS 421) and Hismaic (JSTham 695–696), with the **g** glyph in Hismaic and the **o** glyph (= [g]) in Safaitic. If the men who carved these inscriptions belonged to the same group, then it would suggest that Hismaic and Safaitic *g* were phonetically close if not identical. If the tribal name originated in Hismaic, then it would be rather odd to render one of Voigt's or Knauf's reconstructed values with the *g* glyph in Safaitic, and vice versa.<sup>35</sup>

## Part II: A re-reading of Line 4 of the Madaba Inscription

As mentioned in the introduction, the Madaba Hismaic inscription is one of the longest witnesses to the language of the Hismaic inscriptions. We will give Graf and Zwettler's reading and interpretation here, and then offer an alternative understanding of the text based on a re-interpretation of Line 4.

Reading and Translation of Graf and Zwettler 2004<sup>36</sup>

[l] flhn bn hn bn 'tm d-'l n[...] w-s  
qm l-'lh š'b f-tdr' w-t'ny w ts[d]  
{d} l-h b-kill m fl w-ndr 'rb 'sl't  
m-nrt w-'fut w-ythlb šhry w  
llk trhm 'ly w-dkrt lt 'sy'-n kill-h{m}  
{š}dr w-hbdn w-'šlh w-'qrb w-bn [...]?  
whblh w-'wdlh w-s'dlh w-zd w-bn hrb  
w-'bdt w-ys' w-sm w-dkrt  
lt nm ys'n-n w-l'nt lt nm ylh  
[r]bš wq'-n d[n]

For/by Flhn son of Hn son of 'tm of the tribe of (...) and he became (mortally/chronically) ill due to or through the agency/by the will/for the sake of the god Ša'b; and he has been reduced to abject supplication and afflicted with distress or recurrent fever, although he had strained/exerted himself to the utmost for his (sc. Ša'b's) sake/on his behalf by means of/through all that he (sc. the author) has done, having vowed/dedicated four commodity lots (or four silver-shekel weights) of Indigo and Verdigris pigments/dyes/colour agents. And (now) he sweats feverishly (as a horse[?]). Why don't/won't you (i.e. Ša'b) be compassionate to me?! – and may Lāt be mindful of our associates/comrades, all of them: Šdr, Hbdn, 'šlh, 'qrb, bn ..., Whblh, 'wdlh, Zd, Bn Hrb, and 'dn, Mlk bn S'dlh, 'd, wškt, 'bdt, ys', and Sm, and may Lāt be mindful of those who associate/consort/league with us! And may Lāt curse him who would destroy/damage or ruin/mar/obliterate/scratch out this hammered/chiseled inscription/impression of ours!

Let us re-examine Line 4, specifically, the sentence which Graf and Zwettler parse as *w-ythlb šhry* and translate as 'and he sweats feverishly like a horse' or as 'my body flows with my sweat', an alternative offered in the commentary. Both interpretations strain credulity, even though they draw upon words attested in the Arabic dictionaries. Graf and Zwettler connect *ythlb* with the Classical Arabic verb *taḥallaba* 'he perspired/sweated' and the word *šhry* with the noun *šuhār*, meaning 'sweat', 'fever', usually associated with horses. They explain away the final *y* away as a first person possessive pronoun. This, however, would be at odds with the third person verb preceding it. In order to produce a more grammatically agreeable interpretation, they prefer to take the *y* as a *nisbah* adjectival ending,

<sup>35</sup>The value of *g* as [g] is especially clear in Safaitic as it is used to transcribe Greek and Latin [g], *grfš* = Agrippa; *lgym* = Legion.

<sup>36</sup>Graf and Zwettler, "Uraynibah West", vocalised the personal names, giving all possible identifications. I have modified their translation to keep simply the consonantal skeleton, to help make their already difficult-to-read translation easier to follow.

producing the strange expression ‘my horse-like sweat’. Neither of these options seems very convincing to me, especially in light of the structure of the inscription. At this point in the text, the author describes his deeds of atonement: he has vowed four commodity lots of dyes and so, logically, we should expect here another related activity before requesting mercy from the deity.

Al-Khraysheh parses this sentence as *w ythl b-šhry*, connecting the verb with the Sabaic *hl* ‘to pay a sin-offering’. He explains the absence of the final *alif*, that is, glottal stop, by arguing that it had become an “*alif-maqṣūrah*”. While there is evidence for the loss of the glottal stop in Hismaic, such a sound change fails to explain the spelling in our text. The attested outcome of the loss of a glottal stop is *y*, as in *yqry* (MNM b 6) < \*yiqraʔu. It should also be noted that the glottal stop is not omitted in any other environment in this text. CTSS 3 is an example of an inscription lacking the glottal stop and it spells the phrase *d l* ‘he of the lineage’ as *d yl*, while in the present text the phrase is spelled correctly as *d l*. Thus, while it is not impossible to imagine that the loss of a glottal stop in final position produced an unwritten long *ā*, this remains only a theoretical possibility not borne out in any text. I believe that such explanations should be a last resort, and must always be strongly supported by the word’s context in an inscription, which is clearly not the case for *ythl*.

Al-Khraysheh takes *šhry* as the name of a shrine, which is entirely speculative and unprovable, and motivated only by his interpretation of *ythl*—ultimately a circular argument. While I agree with al-Khraysheh’s parsing of the text over that of Graf and Zwettler, I will suggest a new interpretation of these words.

*ythl*: The verbs *hl* /ħalla/ and *hll* /ħallala/ are common in both the Safaitic and Hismaic inscriptions, and refer to encamping in a region. A form with a *t*-prefix, *thll*, is also attested in Safaitic, perhaps meaning ‘to depart’, but this likely reflects the tD-stem.<sup>37</sup> I posit that the present verb is the prefix conjugation of a t-stem from the root *hll*, meaning ‘to encamp’. We are prevented from understanding this verb as a tD-stem (= form V) as *l* of this geminate root is written only once. Thus, the verb must be cognate with the Classical Arabic Gt-stem (form VIII, which is identical in meaning with form I), yet here with a prefixed rather than infixed *t*. A prefixed tG-stem occurs in non-Classical forms of Arabic, such as in the Cairene dialect, *itfaʔal*, *yitfaʔal*, although there it has a passive meaning. The prefixed tG-stem is also attested in Aramaic.<sup>38</sup>

*b-šhry*: I believe the best understanding of this phrase, in light of our interpretation of *ythl*, is ‘in the desert’. The noun *šhry* corresponds to Classical Arabic *ṣaḥrāʔu*. Classical Arabic, along with most, later forms of the language, experienced the sound change *āy > āʔ*,<sup>39</sup> e.g. Proto-Semitic \**samāyūm*, Safaitic *sm̄y* /samāy/ but Classical Arabic *samāʔun*, and was likely pronounced /ṣaḥrāy/. The absence of a definite article is expected in Hismaic.

Thus, the sentence should be understood as: ‘and he encamped/will encamp in the desert’. The matter of tense is difficult to decide. The prefix conjugation, used here, may reflect

<sup>37</sup>A. al-Jallad and A. al-Manaser, “New Epigraphica from Jordan II: Three Safaitic-Greek Partial Bilingual Inscriptions”, *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 2 (2016), pp. 55–66.

<sup>38</sup>For a discussion on the position of the *t* in the T-stems, see S. Weninger, “Reconstructive Morphology”, in *The Semitic Languages: An International Handbook*, (eds.) S. Weninger, G. Khan, M. Streck and J. Watson, (Boston-Berlin, 2011), p. 157.

<sup>39</sup>On the historical background of this ending, see Van Putten, “Feminine Endings \*-Ay and \*-Āy”.

a narrative use, where it is contextually past tense, perhaps employed stylistically to mark the end of a sequence of atonement activities. We may equally understand this form as a future tense, introducing another promise to the deity in order to complete the author's repentance.

So then, how are we to understand these words in light of the rest of the inscription? I would suggest that this is a votive text of the penitential genre, similar, but not identical, to the South Arabian penitential texts from Haram.<sup>40</sup> It would be wrong to ignore the fact that all three Madaba inscriptions (the present one and two others known so far) and the Haram texts employ a sequence of verbs derived from the roots *ḏr'* and *'nw*. In South Arabia, these are *hḏr'* and *'nw* as compared to *tḏr'* and *t'ny* in our text.<sup>41</sup> While the two types of inscriptions differ in more ways than they are similar, this commonality at the very least suggests that they belong to the same textual genre, as suggested already by Khraysheh.<sup>42</sup> It is possible that they both draw on a related oral formula, adapted to the different linguistic settings of the Sabaic of South Arabia and the Arabic of the southern Levant.

This fact should therefore inform our understanding of the first sentence, without word boundaries: *sqm'lhš'ḏb*. Khraysheh understood it as *sāqa mā li-'ilāh ṣa'ḏb* 'he offered what was owed to the god Ṣa'ḏb' cf. Classical Arabic *sāqa 'ilay-hi ṣ-ṣay'a*. I believe this interpretation is sound but can perhaps be improved in light of the South Arabian genre. If we take the text as penitential, we would expect a confessional component. In South Arabia, authors publicly confess various sins, while there is no clear description of a misdeed in our text if we follow Khraysheh's interpretation. Therefore, Graf and Zwettler's parsing of the phrase as *sqm l-'lh ṣ'ḏb* might be preferred. In this case, *sqm* should not be taken as a physical illness, but instead as an expression signifying sickness as a consequence of sin, an idea that finds several Biblical parallels: Psalm 38:4 or Micah 6:13.<sup>43</sup> This meaning could have been intended in our text, or the verb could have shifted, through metonymy, to mean 'to sin': 'to be ill (as a result of sin) > 'to sin'. Perhaps in the North Arabian tradition, it was not necessary to state the exact details of one's transgression, but only to make clear that one had sinned against the deity or had become spiritually "ill" because of sin.

Once we understand the phrase as such, the rest of the inscription opens up. The author explains that he has transgressed against the god Ṣ'ḏb, and then makes a supplication, publicly suffers, and exerts himself for the sake of the deity to atone for his misdeeds. He vows material goods and then goes into ritualistic social isolation, encamping in the desert, perhaps to purify himself of his sin.<sup>44</sup> Finally, he asks the deity to show mercy upon him, before ending his inscriptions with prayers for his companions and the protection of the text.

<sup>40</sup>C. J. Robin, *Inabba'*, Haram, al-Kāfir, Kamna et al-Ḥarāshif. Fasc. A: Les documents. Fasc. B: Les planches. *Inventaire des inscriptions sudarabiques*, 1 (Paris, 1992).

<sup>41</sup>For example, Haram 40 which records the confession of a man who had intercourse with a menstruating woman and ends with *f-hḏr' w-'nw w-yhl<'>n w-l-ywbn* 'and he showed submission and distress and will pay a fine so may he be generous' (trans. CSAI).

<sup>42</sup>Al-Khraysheh, "An Arabic in Thamudic".

<sup>43</sup>This meaning also better fits the two attestations of *saqim* in the Quran (37:89, 145).

<sup>44</sup>Asceticism is a common religious ritual across the world. In the Arabian context, we need only think to the story of Mohammad's first revelation. Tradition relates that he had withdrawn from the city to meditate in the cave of Ḥirā', where he had his first encounter with the angel Gabriel.



I offer the following translation of the text based on Graf and Zwettler but with my new readings in bold>.

[l] flhn bn hn bn 'tm d-'l n[lg] w-s  
 qm l-'lh š'b f-tḏr' w-t'ny w tš[d]  
 {d} l-h b-kill m f'l w-nḏr 'rb' 'sl't  
 m-nrt w-'fnt **w-ythl b-šhry** w  
 ll-k trhm 'l-y w-dkrt lt 'šy'-n kll-h {m}  
 {š}dr w-hbdn w-'šlh w-'qrb w-bn [...?]  
 whblh w-'wḏlh w-s'dlh w-zd w-bn ḥrb  
 w-'bdt w-yš' w-sm w-dkrt  
 lt mn yš' n-n w-l'nt lt mn yḥ  
 [r]bš wq'-n **d**<sup>45</sup>

By Flhn son of Hn son of 'tm of the lineage of Ntg and he sinned against the god of Š'b and so he supplicated, toiled, and exerted himself for his (the god's) sake in all he has done and vowed four commodity lots of indigo and verdigris and encamped in the desert, for who but you can show mercy upon me?! And may Allāt be mindful of all of our companions, of Šdr and Hbdn and 'šlh and 'qrb and bn ... and Whblh and 'wḏlh and S'dlh and Zd and Bn Ḥrb and 'bdt and Yš' and Sm and may Allāt be mindful of whosoever leagues with us and may Allāt curse whosoever would efface this inscription of ours.

### Sigla

- CTSS: Hismaic inscriptions in V. A. Clark, "Three Safaitic Stones from Jordan", *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 24 (1980), pp. 125–128.
- DHH: Hismaic inscriptions in S. al-Theeb and M. al-Hayšān, *Nuqūš Šafawīyah (Šafā'yayah) min Qā' al-'amabiyyāt Umm gadīr wa-l-'amāriyyah fī šamālī 'l-mamlakat al-'arabiyyah al-sa'ūdiyyah* (Al-Riyāḏ, 2016).
- KJC: Hismaic inscriptions in King, "Hismaic".
- MNM: Hismaic inscriptions J. T. Milik, "Nouvelles inscriptions sémitiques et grecques du pays de Moab", *Liber Annuus* 9 (1958–59), pp. 330–358.

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<sup>45</sup>Zwettler and Graf interpret a flaw on the stone as the letter *n*. We have accepted Khaysheh's original reading of the final word as *d* 'this'.