A Short Aramaic Epigraphic Miscellany from Al-A'ērḏiyyeh— Northwest Arabia Revisited

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Abstract

This contribution deals with a short Aramaic graffito discovered on a rock facade at al-A'ērḏiyyeh within the al-Masmā mountain range, which lies between Taymā' and Ḥa'il in the north of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The text is transcribed, and its words and names are explained linguistically and etymologically within the framework of the Semitic languages. A glimpse on the introduction of Aramaic into the Ancient North Arabia is presented.

Keywords: Aramaic, North Arabia, Tayma, Taymā', Ha'il, epigraphy, Imperial/ official Aramaic, Achaemenid Persian Empire.

Aramaic and its introduction to North Arabia

Aramaic[1] is a Semitic language originally spoken by the Arameans, one of the peoples of the ancient Fertile Crescent. It belongs to the Northwest Semitic branch of the larger Semitic language family[2]. The earliest historical evidence of the Arameans is revealed in the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser I (ca. 1100 B.C.)[3]. Aramaic itself comprises a large number of linguistic forms spoken and written in various scripts over a period of 3,000 years.[4] It has always coexisted and interacted with other languages as a result of political, cultural, and social circumstances. It was used by the Assyrians as a second language in the eighth century B.C.[5], but it gradually spread under the Babylonians in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. to become the lingua franca of the Near East. It then became the official language of the Persian Achaemenid dynasty (559–330 B.C.)[6]. After the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek replaced Aramaic as the official language throughout the former Persian Empire[7], but various local forms of Aramaic continued as written prestige languages. These included Qumran, Nabataean, Palmyrene, Eastern Mesopotamian, and Arsacid Aramaic, all of which were heavily influenced by the Achaemenid chancellery language and, therefore, share a common cultural framework[8]. Aramaic continued to be

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1 For a comprehensive introduction to the history of Aramaic, see Gzella (2015).
2 See Huehnergard and Pat-El (2019) for an up-to-date classification and introduction to the Semitic languages.
3 See Bunnens (2009) for further discussion.
4 For an overview of the diversity of Aramaic idioms, see Waltisberg and Rudolf (2018).
5 At this stage, it was the language of the Syrian kingdoms (Damascus, Hamat, etc.).
6 Streck (2011) provides a thorough introduction on Aramaic Akkadian contact. See further Folmer (2020: 391f.).
7 See Folmer (2020: 373f.)
8 See Gzella (2011: 598ff.)

used until about 650 A.D. when it was sidelined by Arabic. However, Aramaic dialects survived among various religious communities, the most important of which were various Christian communities, some of which continue until today.

Compared to other regions, such as the Levant and Mesopotamia, the linguistic and social features of North Arabia during the first millennium B.C. remain scattered and inconclusive. Over the past hundred years, thousands of inscriptions have been found representing various local languages that scholars collectively term Ancient North Arabian (ANA), which includes Safaitic, Hismaic, Dadanitic, Taymanitic, Dumatic, Thamudic B, Thamudic C, etc.[9] A script similar to Ancient South Arabian (ASA) was used to write ANA inscriptions. Scholars initially tried to understand the linguistic system of these inscriptions based on their proximity to Classical Arabic. Despite the large number of ANA texts, which were written without vowel representation, their short, formulaic nature has not yet allowed scholars to draw definitive conclusions regarding their affiliation or classification within the Semitic language family. Most ANA inscriptions are also difficult to date, except in select cases. For example, some Taymanitic inscriptions reference the name of the Babylonian king Nabonidus, who retreated to Taymā' for a 10-year sojourn after he left the rule of Babylon to his son Belshazzar (Hayajneh 2001a and b). We can assume that Nabonidus introduced or at least promoted the use of Aramaic as an official language at Taymā'. After the collapse of the Babylonian Empire and the onset of Achaemenid Persian control, Aramaic remained the official language of the Near East. The language of the Achaemenid Chancellery remained an official written language of the later Nabataean kingdom (Stein 2018: 41).

In the last two decades, an increasing number of Aramaic inscriptions have been discovered in the Taymā' oasis. These are often funerary inscriptions bearing local ANA names. The frequent mention of the god Ṣlm in the Taymanitic and Aramaic inscriptions indicates that Aramaic was used in a multilingual context and may have been a common means of dealing with legal and official matters, as elsewhere in the Achaemenid Empire (Gzella 2015: 194f.). Inscriptions in imperial or official Aramaic script were discovered in Taymā' as result of the of Saudi-German excavations between 2004 and 2015. Most are short inscriptions on tombstones or other unspecified objects, but a few can be classified as votive and building inscriptions, while one documents the transfer of agricultural property (see e.g., Stein 2018: 41). Local Arabian names appear most often in Aramaic tombstone inscriptions (Stein 2018: 41), but the indigenous population of Taymā' appears to have primarily used a local language and script designated by scholars as "Taymanitic" (Macdonald 2000, Hayajneh 2011, 2017). Although the newly discovered imperial Aramaic inscriptions are not rich in content, they do evidence the important role that Aramaic played as a language of administration at Taymā'. This role may be explained by the fact that the institutions that used Aramaic did not arise until the stay of Nabonidus at the oasis, whereas other north Arabian centers, such as al-'Ula, were not introduced to such Aramaic traditions.[10] As such, after the stay of Nabonidus, Taymā' continued to function as the center of Achaemenid administration in northwest Arabia. The Aramaic writing culture in Taymā' persisted until imperial Aramaic was replaced throughout the region by

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9 Macdonald (2000, 2003 and 2010) developed a categorization of the Ancient North Arabian epigraphic materials. See also Hayajneh (2011, 2017). The studies of Al-Jallad (e.g., 2018, 2020) and Norris (2018a and b) also provide significant developments in the classification of the epigraphical groups of ancient North Arabia.

10 The almost complete absence of Aramaic inscriptions in al-'Ula indicates that Aramaic did not acquire the same status there as at Taymā', this may indicate that the authority of the Achaemenid state at Taymā' did not extend to Dadan (Stein 2013: 41).

Nabataean, likely during the first century B.C.; hence, Aramaic remained at Taymā' in the form of the new lingua franca of the Nabataean Empire (see Stein 2013: 41f.).

The Aramaic graffito of *Al-Aʿērḏiyyeh*

The Aramaic graffito from al-A'ērḏiyyeh was first depicted in a book published by Alfadhel (2022) in which a collection of Arabic inscriptions from Ḥā'il was treated, however neither a reading of the text nor a philological commentary was presented. New images were made by Mamdouh Alfadhel to facilitate a better decipherment of the text. The graffito is found on a rock face of a large rock outcrop (see Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6) located at the site of al-A'ērḏiyyeh within the al-Masmā mountain range[11] about 100 km from Ǧubba in the northeast, 160 km from Ḥā'il in the east, and 150 km from Taymā' in the west (Coordinates: 27.4953636, 40.0858169)[12]. It should be noted that many of the region's rock face exhibit rich ANA epigraphic material as well as Islamic Arabic inscriptions. The abundance of inscriptions suggests this area was used as a corridor for trade and transit throughout history.

The Aramaic graffito adds to a very small collection of Aramaic graffiti originating from outside of Taymā'; a few short graffiti were also discovered around Dadan (al-'Ulā), some 120 kilometers to the south of Taymā' (Sima 1999)[13]. This new Aramaic evidence means that further explorations in the region between Ḥā'il, Taymā', and al-'Ulā could yield new Aramaic inscriptions and change the scholarly discourse about the introduction and use of Aramaic in North Arabia.

Transcription:
The text consists of two lines and reads[14]:
1) *l zydh ṭbh*
2) *tym'*

Translation:
1) To good *Zydh*
2) *Tym'*

Epigraphy:
Palaeographically, the script shows similarities to the monumental Aramaic script, which could be dated to the fifth–fourth centuries B.C.; more specifically 4th century B.C. because of the shape of the horizontal top stroke. Traces of three Aramaic letters on the lower right side of the rock face beneath the main graffito are visible and can be read as *tms* (see Fig. 7), but the last letter is not clear. The patina suggests it is older than the inscription under study, or perhaps was executed by another hand. There are also traces of

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11 It is believed by the local inhabitants of Ḥā'il and its surrounding that this mountain range is correlated with the place name al-Muḥaǧǧar, which is mentioned by the pre-Islamic poet Labīd bin Rabī'a.

12 https://maps.app.goo.gl/YFnfc3jKq9cFWMUc6?g_st=ic

13 See also Teima 11, 13, 15, 17–19 in Schwiderski (2004).

14 I am thankful to Professor André Lemaire (Department of Historical and Philological Sciences at the Sorbonne in Paris) for his feedback on the reading and further comments on this contribution. I am also thankful to Dr. Glenn Corbett for his editorial comments on an early version on this contribution. However, any mistakes are solely mine.

other letters to the left of the main graffito that are unclear and cannot be deciphered. A drawing of an ibex[15] is visible at the upper right side of the image.

Philological commentary:

L: The *lām* appears here as the Semitic preposition "for, to, etc." (DNWI, p. 549ff.). Although the text exists in a linguistic and cultural space, where the ANA epigraphical type is dominant, we are not able to interpret this particle as a *lām auctoris* (i.e., "by"), which occurs in many of the area's ANA inscriptions (see Macdonald 2006: 294f. and n. 97, 98, and 99)[16].

Zydh: This one-word name (see Fig. 4) is derived from the Semitic root *z-y-d* ("increase") from which a wide variety of Semitic personal names are attested, including in Aramaic, ANA, and ASA (Hayajneh 1998: 158f., Mercato 2018: 59). The ending *-h* is attested in other personal names of men from the Aramaic inscriptions from Taymāʾ, e.g., *Gmyth* (Taymāʾ-Aramaic II, p. 195), *Wʾlh,* (and *Wʾlt* as a woman's name; Taymāʾ-Aramaic II, p. 195), *Ḥṭmh* (Taymāʾ-Aramaic II, p. 195) and *ʿmrh* (Taymāʾ-Aramaic II, p. 198). On the other hand, women's names are also attested with the ending *-h*, e.g., *G{z}{y}ʾh* (Taymāʾ-Aramaic II, p. 194), *Gzylh* (Taymāʾ-Aramaic II, p. 194). In this context, it is noted that the Arabic form of the divine name *Manāt* appears as *Mnwt* as well as *Mnwh* in the Aramaic of Taymāʾ (Taymāʾ-Aramaic II, p. 196).

The final *-h* attached to this category of personal names may indicate a hypocoristic ending. It is well known that Semitic personal names are based on words that consist of either short verbal and nominal sentences or genitive compounds. Some appear as an abbreviated form of names with only one of the elements preserved to which a suffix is normally added. Such names are called "hypocoristic" (Lipinski 1997: 568). The present onomastic form, *Zydh*, could be interpreted as a verbal sentence, "(God NN) has increased" or as a construct state combination, "Increase (of the god NN)". Considering *-h* as an Aramaic hypocoristic suffix may shed light on the function of the *-t* suffix in ANA, ASA, and Arabic anthroponomastic male names, such as as *Zydt*. It is also possible that the exchange of *-t* and *-h*, as in the names *Wʾlt* and *Wʾlh* in the Aramaic inscriptions from Taymāʾ, could point to the pausal pronunciation, i.e., as in the Arabic form, *Wāʾilah*.[17]

ṭbh: This word (Fig. 6), which is derived from the root *ṭyb*, *ṭb* ("goodness, benevolence")[18], represents an adjective marked with the masculine emphatic state ending *-h*[19] positioned after the name. This adjective is used to indicate the quality of things or a

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15 For ibex in rock drawing representations in North Arabia, especially from the Hail region, see Jennings et. al. (2013).

16 On the basis of some bilingual Nabataean-Thamudic E/Hismaic graffiti, the presence of the *lām auctoris* in ANA texts and its absence in the Nabataean versions leaves no doubt that it functions in such contexts to introduce the text rather than to indicate possessiveness (see Hayajneh 2016: 507 and n. 6).

17 It has been already pointed out that in ASA anthroponomastics, the ending *-t,* e.g., in *Rbʿt,* can be regarded as a hypocoristic ending (Hayajneh 1998: 22f.). Gratzl (1906) considered the ending *-at*, e.g., in Ḥāriṯa(t) and Ṭalḥa(t) as hypocoristic endings in the Arabic-name giving system. It is natural for women's names to end with *-t* in their graphic appearance to indicate the gender of the bearer of the name, but they may also have another function, whether in proper names that are borne by males or females, to indicate that the name is abbreviated, i.e., to be understood as a singulative form (see Hayajneh 1998: 22).

18 See DNWSI (p. 417f.) for lexical derivatives in Aramaic language variants.

19 The emphatic or determinate state expresses the definiteness of the noun. Old Aramaic and Imperial Aramaic share the same formal characteristics. However, whereas in Old Aramaic ʾ is still a genuine consonant and – ʾ in the emphatic state ending represents /-aʾ/, this is certainly not the case in Imperial Aramaic, where the substandard spellings *-h* and *-yh* (masc. emph.), *-th* (fem. emph.), and – ʾ (fem. sg.abs.) demonstrate that -ʾ had lost its consonantal value and represents /-ā/ (Folmer 2012).

person's moral virtue. Its nuance depends on the meaning of the word it describes, and in relation to people, it refers to moral goodness (Gzella 2018)[20].

*Tym*ʾ: This cluster of signs (Fig. 7) can be interpreted in two ways:

1)   It could be the Aramaic form of the geographic name Taymā', which is attested in other Aramaic inscriptions in the form *tym*ʾ[21] from Taymā' itself (Taymā'-Aramaic II, p. 200). However, the brevity of the inscription does not allow us to confirm that this name denotes the well-known oasis of Taymā'.

2)   The letters could indicate the signature of the author of the inscription himself. Numerous Semitic one-word as well as theophoric personal names are derived from or formed with the root/lexeme *tym*, "servant" (i.e., "Servant (of DN)"). Examples are found in the ANA and Middle Aramaic inscriptions from North Arabia and the Levant, e.g., *Tymw* in Nabataean, Palmyrian, Hatraian, Hismaic, and other ANA epigraphical groups (Marcato 2018: 131f.)[22]. If we take this interpretation, the suffix-' is likely a hypocoristic ending, which functions to create a shortened form of a personal name. Other endings are evident for one and two-word names, i.e. *-', -w, -wy, -y, -y*', and *-yw* in Aramaic, especially Hatarian inscriptions (Marcato 2018: 151f.). Marcato (2018: 152) states that the attached suffix – *'* to Aramaic and Arabian names may stand for a shortened form or a determinate state by means of a suffix.[23] Hence, the name *Tym'* may be translated as "Servant of (God NN)".

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20 See Militarev (2015: 107) for more parallels in Semitic languages.

21 The geographic name is attested in the form *tymy* as well (Taymā'-Aramaic II, p. 200).

22 See Marcato (2018: 131f.) for further onomastics parallels.

23 Marcato (2018: 152f.) notices that personal names from Hatra among which hypocoristica suffixed with – *'* are attested together with hypocoristica bearing the suffix *-w* are traditionally considered proof of the Arab origin of the name (e.g., *š'* and *šw*; *blg'* and *blgw*). The corpus thus displays a parallel situation to that attested for Safaitic names, which may be evidence of the coexistence of Arab hypocoristica and their Aramaized equivalents at Hatra as well. In this context, one may highlight (e.g., Sonnevelt 2019: 9) that the suffix *-ā* is the most common hypocoristic suffix during the Neo- and Late Babylonian period is *-ā*, which seems to have replaced suffixes that were more common before the first millennium, such as *-aya*, *-at*, and *-ān*. As hypocoristic suffix *-ā* represents alphabetic *-h* or – *'* it is thought to be connected to the Aramaic definite article that follows the noun. However, it is added to names from other Semitic groups, such as Akkadian and Arabian as well (Sonnevelt 2019: 9).
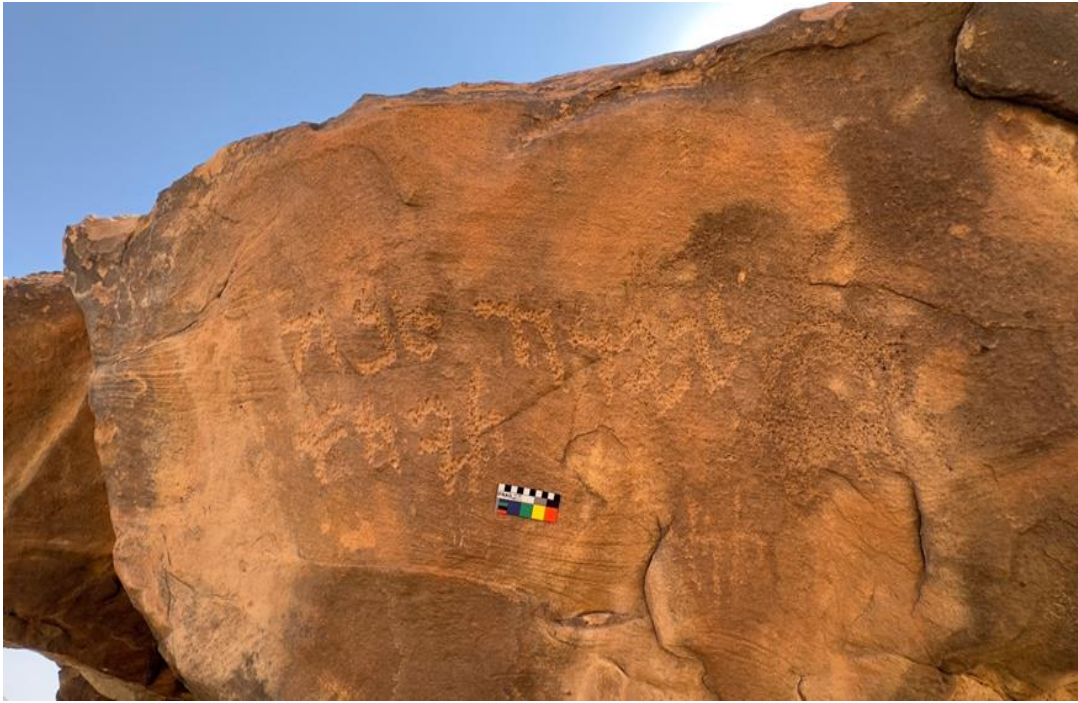
Fig. 1-A short Aramaic epigraphic miscellany from Al-A'ērḍiyyeh. (Photo by Mamdouh Alfadhel)

Fig. 2-A short Aramaic epigraphic miscellany from Al-A'ērḍiyyeh. (Photo by Mamdouh Alfadhel)

Fig. 3-A short Aramaic epigraphic miscellany from Al-A'ērḍiyyeh. (Photo by Mamdouh Alfadhel)

Fig. 4-A short Aramaic epigraphic miscellany from Al-A'ērḍiyyeh. (Photo by Mamdouh Alfadhel)

Fig. 5-A short Aramaic epigraphic miscellany from Al-Aʿērḍiyyeh. (Photo by Mamdouh Alfadhel).

Fig. 6-A short Aramaic epigraphic miscellany from Al-Aʿērḍiyyeh. eastern Taymā. (Photo by Mamdouh Alfadhel)

Fig. 7-A short Aramaic epigraphic miscellany from Al-A'ērḍiyyeh. (Photo by Mamdouh Alfadhel)

إعادة نظر في نقش آرامي قصير من الأعيرضية – شمال غرب الجزيرة العربية

هاني هياجنه[1]، ممدوح الفاضل[2]

ملخص

تتناول هذه المساهمة نقشاً آرامياً قصيراً اكتُشِفَ محفورًا على واجهةٍ صخريةٍ في مكان يدعى "الأعيرضية" ويقع ضمن سلسلة جبال "المَسْمَى" الرابضة ما بين تيماء وحائل في شمال المملكة العربية السعودية، إذ فُكَّت مغالقُ حروفِه، وشُرِحَت كلماتُ نَصِّهِ، لغويًا، وتأثيليًا، في إطار التراث اللغوي السامي، كما وُضِع النصُّ في سياق التاريخ اللغوي والثقافي الذي ساد في شمال الجزيرة العربية في الالف الأول قبل الميلاد، فأُعْطِيَتْ لمحةٌ عجلةٌ عن تاريخ دخول اللغة الآرامية الى الجزيرة العربية، لا سيما شمالها، وذلك استنادا إلى ما هو معروف من منشورات وأدبيات حديثة.

الكلمات الدالة: النقوش الآرامية، شمال الجزيرة العربية، تيماء، حائل، النقوش، آرامية الدولة / الآرامية الرسمية، الإمبراطورية البابلية، الإمبراطورية الأخمينية الفارسية.

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