A new Nabataean inscription from Tayma’a

A new six-line Nabataean inscription was recently discovered during building work in the centre of the oasis city of Tayma’a, north-west Saudi Arabia. It is the epitaph of a ruler, or chief citizen, of the city and is dated by the era of the Roman Province of Arabia to AD 203. All but one of the names in the text are Jewish, and this is by far the earliest record of Jews in the oasis. The Nabataean script of the epitaph is also of great interest since it shows features which are normally associated with much later periods in the development of the Nabataean into the Arabic script.

**Keywords**: Nabataean inscription, Nabataean script, Tayma, Arabia

The Nabataean inscription published here was found in March 2009 at Sabha, in the city centre of Tayma’a, north-west Saudi Arabia. This location lies a few metres north of the Tabuk-Madina road, east of the Wadi Burayda which flows towards the sabkha of Tayma’a (GPS [WGS 84] N 27° 37’ 49.13”, E 38° 33’ 0.95”). The inscription was discovered in one of several rectangular foundation pits excavated for the construction of a new building. The deposit consisted of mud and some quarry stones mixed with modern waste. The deposit was c. 70 cm thick and lay upon an asphalt layer which was also detected in other foundation pits. The asphalt probably originates from a former street or square in this area. It is therefore clear that the inscription was not in situ when it was found and it seems to have been brought there in modern times when the asphalt layer was covered with material (including the quarry stones) which had been removed from a possible ancient site.

The inscription is carved on a sandstone stela 50 cm high, 46 cm wide and 9.6 cm thick. The inscription of six lines is enclosed within a border, carved in relief, consisting of three parallel horizontal lines at the top and the bottom, and a *tabula ansata* flanked by a double vertical line on the left and on the right. The interior of the left ‘ear’ of the *tabula ansata* has been hollowed out but that on the right has not been finished and so contains a triangle with a small hole in the middle.1

The only damage to the stela consists of a chip to the ‘frame’ just above the right ‘ear’ and to the double line just above it, a small chip just below the last line of text, and some abrasion of the frame just below the left ‘ear’.

The text is in relief and, unusually for a Nabataean inscription, the lines are divided by (more or less) horizontal bars, also in relief. However, compare CIS ii 336, an Aramaic inscription on a stela from Tayma’a, which also has these divisions.2 It would appear that the frame was prepared first and that the inscription and the dividing lines were not marked out on the stone in advance but instead the mason simply carved them as he went along, with the result that he had to reduce the height of the last three lines and

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1 This occurs occasionally on other *tabulae ansatae* and it has been suggested that it represents a symbolic pin by which the *tabula* was theoretically attached to the surface on which it was carved or, in the case of a wall, into which it was fitted. See the discussion in Lewis & Macdonald 2003: 80 and n. 231. However, it is probably accidental here, or else it marks where the mason intended to start hollowing out the space.

2 By contrast, dividing lines of this sort are almost universally employed in formal inscriptions in relief at the oasis of Dedan.

Mohammed Al-Najem1 and M.C.A. Macdonald2
1Tayma’ Museum, P.O. Box 22, Tayma 71914, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
2University of Oxford, Oriental Institute, Pusey Lane, OX1 2LE, UK

e-mail: michael.macdonald@orinst.ox.ac.uk
e-mail: alnajem1962@hotmail.com
compress the text in them. On the other hand, it is understandable that the first two lines with the name of the deceased, and particularly the third line which contains his title, would be given prominence; thus, to this extent, the layout may have been intentional.

Text (Fig. 1)\(^3\)

1. \(\text{d} \text{ nps}' \text{s}'yh\)
2. \(\text{byl}' \text{[or: nbl'] br ywsp}\)
3. \(\text{r}'\text{s tmyy dy 'qym}\)
4. \(\text{lhwy 'mrm w 's}\text{mw}\)
5. \(\text{'hwy byrh 'yr}\)
6. \(\text{šnt} 20+20+20+20+10+5+1+1+1 \text{ lhprky}\)

Translation

1. This is the memorial of \(\text{'s}'yh\)
2. the Councillor [or: Nbl'] son of Ywsp
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Commentary

The letter forms: all the letters are clear on the photograph, with the exception of the first two signs in the last word in line 4, although there is in fact little doubt about their reading.

\(d/r\): Note that \(d\), in which the head is joined to the stem at an angle (\(d', \text{ dy}\)), is distinguished from \(r\) where the two lines are joined in a curve (\(br, r's, 'mrm \) [less so], \(byrh, 'yr \) [less so]).

\(y\): In initial position, and in medial position when not joined from the right, \(y\) retains a very slight backward tilt (in \(ywsp\) and \(yr\)), but without the common curve or slight zigzag.

By contrast, \(y\) in medial position when joined from the right (in \(\text{'s}'yh, byl' [?], 'qym and byrh\)) is a straight vertical line indistinguishable in angle and height from initial and medial \(n\) (in \(nps\), \(nbl' [?], \) and \(šnt\)) and \(b\) (in \(byl' \) or \(nbl' \), \(br\), and \(byrh\)). This is possibly the earliest dated example in a formal Nabataean inscription of these three letters having identical forms in these positions, as they do in even the earliest forms of the Arabic script. Interestingly, this is not the case in much later Nabataean inscriptions, e.g. Stiehl 1970 (see fig. 2 and below) of AD 356 (where medial \(n\) and \(y\) are distinguished in \(šny\) and initial \(b\) and medial \(y\) in \(byrh\)), or in Al-Dijyayb 2002: 311, nos 132+133\(^4\) of AD 455/6 (in \(dkyr\), 'bydw). This is yet another indication that there was no smooth chronological progression in the development of the letter forms of the Nabataean script, or of its evolution into the Arabic script.\(^5\)

The final form of \(y\) (in \(tmyy, dy, lhwy [sic], 'hwy\)) is also interesting. It contrasts with the zigzag found in most first- and second-century Nabataean formal

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\(3\) We use the following editorial symbols: ? marks a letter the reading of which is doubtful, { } in the translation enclose a word some of the letters of which are doubtful.

\(4\) This is a single text, which was reread by a group of scholars in Paris in 2005. See Nehmé 2009: 50–52.

\(5\) See the discussions of this in Macdonald, in press a, and of the wider implications in the approach to alphabetic scripts of the Near East, and particularly Arabia, in Macdonald, in press b.
texts, and in Avdat 2 (AD 204), which is from the year after our inscription. In our text, final y has the rightward sweep found in some of the papyri of the end of the first and the beginning of the second centuries AD, and in some late inscriptions such as JSNab 17 (AD 267), the Namārā inscription (AD 328) and Stiehl 1970 (AD 356). However, it is noticeable that, in contrast to these other cases, here the end of the tail runs either straight downwards or curves slightly back towards the left, a trait which may possibly be paralleled in one of the dipinti from Wādi Ramm (see Macdonald 2003: 53, fig. 38 line 14 and fig. 23).

s: The form in y wsp is similar to that in the Ruwwáfah inscription (AD 167/169), although the closest parallels are in the papyri, e.g. P.Yadin 3 (AD 97/98).7

p: While the medial p (in nps) has its traditional shape, the final form (in y wsp) has a hook which almost reaches the base line8 (i.e. making it a loop with no stem) and a long, straight, (more or less) horizontal tail. A similar form is found in the words yʾl p in H 8/7 (Hegra, 1 BC/AD) and ksp in H 30/7 (AD 7/8),9 but is rare in other Nabataean formal inscriptions (see Macdonald 2003: 53, fig. 38; Gruendler 1993: 81, 83), though it occurs in some Nabataean graffiti from north-west Arabia.10 Curiously, in spite of the gap of five centuries, it is very close to the form in some early Arabic inscriptions such as that in the word yastankif in the mosaic inscription of the Dome of the Rock (AD 692).11 All this suggests that this form was a long-standing alternative to those with a stem topped by a small hook or circle and a short and/or diagonal tail.

r: See under d above. In br, the b is joined to the r two-thirds of the way down the stem, whereas y is joined to r just above its foot in byrh, and at its base in yʾr.

The names

With the exception of ʿsmw all the names are Jewish. ʿšyḥ (line 1) is thought to be an Aramaeized form of Biblical ʾšyḥ (Isaiah). This form has been found on an ostracon at Masada (Ilan 2002: 180, no. 11) and so must predate AD 73.

Nbḥ (line 2), if this is the correct reading (see below under ‘General’), is found in the formNbḥt as a Jewish family name in the Midrash Sifré to Deuteronomy, which dates from before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 (2002: 393). It may ultimately derive from the place name Nēbbalat which is mentioned in Nehemiah 11:34.

Y wsp (line 2) is, of course a well-known Jewish name which was widely used in antiquity (2002: 150–168). It has also been found in two Nabataean graffiti: JSNab 262 (from between Māḏāʾin Silāḥ and al-ʿUlā) where the patronym is ṣwḥ which could represent the Jewish name ṣwḥ (‘Avi’, see Ilan 2002: 399), and al-Diyāyb, 2002: 298, no. 84 (from Jabal Umm Jadhayih, between Māḏāʾin Silāḥ and Tabuk) where the patronym is ṣwḥ, an Arabian name (‘Ghānim’) which is common in Nabataean. Apart from the name y wsp, there is nothing distinctive about these two graffiti.

mrm (line 5) is the name of Moses’ father (Exodus 6:18, 20),12 and was borne by one of the leaders

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6 Apart from JSNab 17, see lines 15, 16, 13, 8, respectively on Macdonald 2003: 53, fig. 38. It also occurs in CIS ii 963 (AD 206) and ARNA 17 (AD 275/6), though these are graffiti, (we are grateful to Laïla Nehme for the reference to the first of these). See the discussion in Macdonald, in press a.

7 Compare lines 7 and 15 respectively in Macdonald 2003: 53, fig. 38. For s in both medial and final place in the papyri see for instance Yadin et al. 2002: pl. 24, in the second and third words of the 12th line (= line 32 of the Lower Version).

8 The lower part is slightly damaged, but is still visible, and the fact that the hole between the two sides of the loop extends down to the tail (cf. the equivalent hole in the p in nps), shows that this must have been the intention.

9 However, compare the ‘normal’ p in ḫp in the same line.

10 Curiously, the same name, y wsp, in al-Diyāyb, 2002: 298, no. 84 (unfortunately undated), on which see below under the name y wsp.

11 This word occurs in the northern section of the inner octagonal arcade.

12 See Horovitz 1925: 159 for a discussion of the forms mrm and ʿmran. Note that although a name mrm occurs in a Taymanitic inscription (Ph 279ap) and possibly an Aramaic text from Taymā (CIS ii 114/2–3), it almost certainly represents the name mr with the suffix -n which is extremely popular in names at Taymā in both Aramaic and Taymanitic inscriptions, e.g. mʾn-n (CIS ii 114/2), mʾn-n (Beyer & Livingstone 1987: 288, no. 2), grm-n (ibid. no. 3), rml-n (JSNab 342); trbh (JSTh 517, 522), sbqg-n (JSTh 522), rtt-n (JSTh 503), bsdq-n (WTay 38), ṣḥbn-n (Esk 6, 67), yʾn-n (Esk 17), yʾz-n (Esk 54), ṣḥbn-n (Esk 081), Ḳb-n (Esk 145), etc. Similarly, ʿmr ṭbh in a graffito at al-Uqlah in Hadramawt, represents mr [with mimation] the Arab’, rather than a name mrm.
of raids by the inhabitants of the Peraea (east of the river Jordan) against Philadelphia (modern Amman), in the reign of the emperor Claudius.\(^{13}\) It is also found on an ossuary in Jerusalem, pre-AD 70, and in the Babylonian Talmud pre-AD 200 (Ilan 2002: 203).

\(\text{"šmwy" does not seem to be found in Jewish sources,}\(^{14}\) and seems to be rare in Arabia and elsewhere. It occurs once in a Nabataean graffito from Jabal Misma near Tayma\(^{2}\) (CIS ii 340); and a rather damaged Taymanitic inscription from al-Badah near Tayma\(^{2}\) reads \(\text{lm \"š\textsuperscript{2}m}\) ‘By \(\text{š\textsuperscript{2}m\}'}.\(^{15}\) There is also one occurrence of \(\text{š\textsuperscript{2}m}\) as a personal name in Late Sabaic (CIH 596/5).

However, Nabataean \(\text{s}\) can of course represent both Ancient North Arabian /\(\text{s}\)\(\rightarrow\)/ and /\(\text{s}\)\(\rightarrow\)/. A personal name (or names) \(\text{s}m\) occurs several times in Safaitic, and \(\text{s}\textsuperscript{1}m\) occurs in Qatabanic and Hadramitic.\(^{16}\) A certain \(\text{š}\text{mwy \\'\text{As}mwy} (\text{Ya\'amur son of As\textsuperscript{2}m\/As\textsuperscript{2}m?}) of Askelon also occurs in a Greek inscription of the Roman period (Lidzbarski 1902: 216, no. 92).\(^{17}\)

**General**

The first word of line 2 is difficult to interpret with any certainty. Because the forms of medial \(b\), \(y\), and \(n\) are identical in this text, a number of readings are possible. Of these, only \(\text{blwy\}' and \(\text{nlwy\}' would seem to provide plausible interpretations. Very tentatively, we would suggest that \(\text{blwy\}' could represent an Aramaeization of Greek \(\text{Boul\textsubscript{2}etnyz} (\text{‘senator\}, \text{‘member of the }\text{boul\textsubscript{2}etny, or city council\'}). This occurs in two Palmyrene texts as \(\text{bylw\}' and \(\text{blwy\}'. Rosenthal explains the change from -\(\text{ov-}\) to -\(\text{y-\) as dissimilation (1936: 20). But note that in \(\text{blwy b\’ntky}\) the first vowel is not marked at all, presumably because it has been shortened. If the first word in the second line of our inscription is indeed \(\text{blwy\}' one would have to assume that the second vowel (\(-\text{ov-}\) of the original had been shortened. Even if this reading is correct, it is unfortunately impossible to identify the exact office in Tayma\(^{2}\) indicated by such a title, or its relationship to the title \(\text{r\’s tymy}\).

If, on the other hand, the word is \(\text{nblwy}, the use of a double personal name, or the juxtaposition of a personal and a family name, would be highly unusual in Nabataean, and has not occurred so far in the Taymanitic and Aramaic inscriptions of Tayma\(^{2}\), though it is common in Dadanitic.\(^{19}\) According to Ilan, the practice is uncommon, but attested, in Jewish nomenclature (2002: 46). Given that the only previous attestation of \(\text{nblwy\}' is as a family name (see above) and it is unlike the sort of second names known from Roman Palestine (Ilan 2002: 47), we could perhaps speculate that it serves as a family name here.

The word \(\text{r\’s\}' in the title \(\text{r\’s tymy}\) has here its normal spelling in Nabataean Aramaic, as opposed to the variant \(\text{ry\’s\}' in the same title in the inscription of AD 356 from Hegr\textsuperscript{2}a\textsuperscript{2}a\textsuperscript{2}a\textsuperscript{2}in S\textsuperscript{2}alih (Stiehl 1970) (see below). The word has already been found in Nabataean in the title \(\text{r\’s \’yn Tbn\ ‘Controller of the Spring of La\’ban\}, at Khirbet edh-Dharih in southern Jordan,\(^{20}\) and one could compare the titles \(\text{r\’s \’yr\}' (‘caravan leader’), and \(\text{r\’s \’dmwr\ ‘chief person, ruler, of Tadmur\}', at Palmyra.\(^{21}\) A title \(\text{r\’s \’}n\text{ryym\ ‘chief of the citizens\}' has also been identified in a Greek-Aramaic bilingual inscription on an ossuary lid from Khirbet Zif near Hebron,\(^{22}\) where it parallels the

\(^{13}\) Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* XX.4.

\(^{14}\) But perhaps compare \(\text{šmyy\) (‘Asma\’i\)' in Ilan 2002: 401?

\(^{15}\) The text is illustrated but not read in Eskoubi 1999: 323 (above no. 240).

\(^{16}\) Qatabanic: CSAI I, 482 and 533 (and possibly as a clan name twice in CSAI I 295). We are most grateful to Peter Stein for this information. In Hadramitic: Ryckmans 1944: 158–160 (Caton Thompson 4/1), 169 (Caton Thompson 29/1); and once in a fragmentary context: CIH 845/1.

\(^{17}\) Lidzbarski compares it to Arabic \(\text{ásam\) and \(\text{ásam\), rather than to the root –\(\text{s}\)-\(M\).

\(^{18}\) In \(\text{bylw\)' \text{tdmwy\) ‘the Palmyrene senator\) (CIS ii 3937/2 of AD 258) and in \(\text{blwy b\’ntky\) ‘senator in Antioch\) (Inv 10. 29/2 of AD 161).

\(^{19}\) The one exception at Tayma\(^{2}\) is the second stela in Imperial Aramaic (see Cross 1986) in which the person setting up the inscription is called \(\text{Prv\’a Shrw\). However, he specifically states that he is of the royal house of Lih\textsuperscript{2}y\textsuperscript{2}a (a kingdom based in Ded\textsuperscript{2}).


\(^{21}\) See PAT 1373/4 and 0290/2–3 respectively.

\(^{22}\) On the title \(\text{πρωτοπο\’}ολ\textsubscript{2}ε\textsuperscript{2}ιτς see Lifshitz 1973-1974:44–46; and Vattioni 1977 who shows that it is not used exclusively in Jewish contexts (1977:25).
The spelling tymy in line 3, with final -y as opposed to the final -i in line 5 of the text from Hegrā (Stiehl 1970) and possibly in an unpublished Taymanitic graffito, is difficult to explain. It is possible that it represents imalā, i.e. a pronunciation *taymē rather than *taymā, but as far as we know, there is no other evidence for such a pronunciation.

The verb qym is, of course, the aphel of the common Aramaic verb qwm 'to stand', with the meaning 'to erect' and has been found before in Nabataean (see Starcky & Strugnell 1966: 237, line 3 and CIS ii 164/1). Given the Jewish context of this inscription, it may be worth noting that this form is also found in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic as opposed to the form 'wqy in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic.

In line 4, 'lhwy must be an error for 'lwxy 'over him'. As far as we can tell, the use of this preposition after the verb qym has only been found once before in Aramaic inscriptions of this period, in a Palmyrene inscription CIS ii 3956 (Stiehl 1970) and possibly in an unpublished Taymanitic graffito, is difficult to explain. It is possible that it represents imalā, i.e. a pronunciation *taymē rather than *taymā, but as far as we know, there is no other evidence for such a pronunciation.

In line 5, 'lwxy presumably refers to both persons named in the line above and the noun must therefore be in the plural. In Nabataean, the plural of 'h with the 3rd person masculine pronominal suffix appears to be identical to one of the forms of the singular with the same suffix. For other examples 'hwxy meaning 'his brothers' see H 36/2, 5 and the commentary there, and Macdonald 2006: 288.

The month of yr corresponds to April-May. The four symbols for 20 are followed by the curve representing 10 and the long stroke for 5, plus three shorter strokes representing units, making in total 98. The stroke representing the last of the units is continued below the line and we have been unable to find a parallel for this. It is presumably simply a decorative flourish. The form of the combined figures 10+5+1+1 is almost exactly paralleled by the figures for 18 in the second Nabataean inscription from Tell Shuqaiyeh in the Egyptian Delta (see Fiema & Jones 1990: 241, fig. 2), though there the final 'flourish' is absent.

The term hprky for the (era of) the Roman Province of Arabia is found in various forms in Nabataean: As hprky, it occurs in Negev 1963: 118, no. 11/2 (year 2), and probably in JSNab 159/2 from Hegrā (year 20?). As hprkyh, it is found in CIS ii 964/2 (year 85), and compare the same spelling in the Jewish

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23 Rahmani 1972 (= SEG XXVI.1668 = XXVII.1014); Yadin 1972; Lifshitz 1973–1974: 44–46. There is in fact only one missing letter between the š and the r, and, according to Rahmani, m would both fit the space and match the surviving traces (1972: 115). However, rš mrym ('head of the masters', on the final m see Kutscher 1972) does not produce a suitable parallel to the Greek πρωτοπολείτης, so Yadin suggested the reading ršl ūhrmy ('chief of the citizens') and speculated that the was probably not pronounced [and] was dropped altogether in the spelling of the title. He refers to 'numerous examples [in Palestinian Aramaic] of the inyin being dropped altogether in spelling' (1972: 236). We are most grateful to Hannah Cotton for these references.

24 As in H 8/7, 31/7, 34/11, etc.

25 Theoretically, of course, one could say that it applies only to the second individual mentioned, šmaw, but this would mean that the relationship of mrm to the deceased would be unexplained, as would be the reason why he is mentioned before (and so apparently given precedence over) the deceased’s brother.

26 Compare the forms listed on DNWSI p. 29, though note that there is no justification for taking 'hwxy in ARNA Nab 30 as representing the plural since there is room for only one name between the w after the author’s name and the word hwxy.

27 It has also been partially restored in P.Yadin 6/2 and 9/2. In both cases the year is lost.
Palestinian Aramaic papyri P.Yadin 7/2 (year 15) and (partially restored) in 8/2 (year 17).28

As ḥprk, it appears in Negev 1963: 119, no. 12/4 (year 20).

As ḥprk bsr, in Milik 1958: 243–246, no. 6/5 (year 3), where the Greek part of the bilingual suggests it stands for ἔσπερη(ε)ίχα, rather than ἔσπερος.

Since the era of Provincia Arabia began on 22nd March AD 106, the month of ʿyr in year 98 of the Province would be equivalent to April/May AD 203 (see Meimaris 1992: 146–148).

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is by far the earliest evidence of a Jewish presence at Tayma’, let alone of Jews in positions of authority there. It is commonly stated that there was a Jewish community in pre-Islamic Tayma’,29 and it has even been suggested that it might have been settled there by Nabonidus in the mid-sixth century BC,30 but until now there has been no direct evidence for it before the early Islamic period.31 There are reports in works of the Islamic period that a Jewish poet of the sixth century AD, al-Samaw’al b. Ādiya, lived in the castle of al-Ablaq at Tayma’ (see Bauer 1995), and that an Arab tribe was forced by the inhabitants of Tayma’ to adopt Judaism before being allowed to settle there.32 However, these are legends recorded considerably later than the people and events they describe, rather than firm contemporary evidence.

There is an obvious parallel to our text in the Nabataean funerary inscription published by Stiehl (1970), which is said to come from Madā’in Śalih (Fig. 2).33

This reads:

1. ḏnḥ - - - - š - - - - ḏr t ṣm[lw]l ṣrš
2. ʿdy - - - - br ḥnḥ br ṣm[lw]l ṣrš
3. ḥgr ’l mwḥy ʿtht brt
4. ʿmrw br ḏynn br ṣm[lw]l
5. ṣry ṭyn’ ḏy ṣm[t]ḥ byṛḥ
6. ṣb ʿšt mṭyn ṣmḥṣyn
7. ṣwḥdy brt ṣnyn ṭlṭyn
8. ṣṃmny

1. This is - - - - which - - - -
2. ḏ[y][wn] son of ḥn son of ṣm[lw]l [chief citizen]
3. of ḥgr’ for [lit. over] ṣm[w]hy his wife, daughter of
4. ʿmrw son of ḏynn son of ṣm[lw]l
5. chief citizen of ṭyn’, who died in the month of
6. Ab in the year two hundred and fifty-
7. one [AD 356] at the age of thirty-
8. eight.

Altheim and Stiehl (1968: 306), followed by almost all subsequent writers,34 read the first name in line 2 and the second in line 3 as ḏnw[n] and that of the deceased as mw[n]. However, the letter read as n in these names is quite distinct from medial ṡ in the rest of the text (cf. ḏnḥ, ḥnḥ, Šnt, snyn, tmny) and identical to medial y (cf. ṣrš, ṭyn’, ṣm[t]ḥ, byṛḥ, mṭyn, ṣṃmyn, ṣnyn, ṭlṭyn). This is particularly clear in the word ṣṃyn (line 7) where the medial forms of the two letters are side by side. The names formerly read as

28 See the parallels collected in Yadin et al. 2002: 91.
29 See the discussion of the various theories on how the Jews came to the Hijāz, in Gil 1984: 204–211; Newby 1988: 14–32.
31 Newby attempts to argue that both St Paul and Rabbi Akiba may have visited pre-existing Jewish communities in the Hijāz (1988: 30–32), but this is based on a confusion of the Arabian Peninsula with the Nabataean kingdom (in the case of St Paul) and Provincia Arabia (in the case of Rabbi Akiba). Of course both the kingdom and the Province included an area of the Hijāz, but the New Testament does not specify where in the Nabataean kingdom St Paul went, nor does the Mishnah specify where in the Province Rabbi Akiba travelled. In both cases, it could have been anywhere from southern Syria to Mada’in Śalih. Newby’s repeated assumption that ‘Jews were present in the peninsula prior to the events of 70 C.E. [the end of the First Jewish Revolt] and 135 C.E. [the end of the Second Jewish Revolt]’ and that ‘Jews came into Arabia in Roman times’ (1988: 32 and 49 respectively) are based not on fact but on inference. In reality, we have no firm evidence at all of Jewish communities in the Peninsula at this period. There may have been some, but as yet their presence cannot be demonstrated.
33 The text was first read and translated in Altheim & Stiehl 1968: 305–309, and was subsequently republished in Stiehl 1970. We are most grateful to Professor Ruth Altheim-Stiehl for kindly making the photograph available to us. In addition to the editorial symbols given in note 3, we use - - - - to mark sections of the text that are too damaged to read. In the translation [ ] enclose parts of words which are restored, or explanations.
34 This includes one of the present authors (Macdonald, e.g. 2003: 53, line 8)!
from Hegra, the names, with one exception (Samwil), are all Arabian.  

Of course, this may simply be chance and we need far more evidence before we can draw any conclusions. The fact that the name Samwil is of Jewish origin may suggest that its bearer was also of Jewish stock, but it does not necessarily mean that he himself was an adherent of Judaism, any more than the Arabian names of his descendants mean that they were not practising Jews. On the other hand, Samwil could have been an ethnically Arab convert to Judaism, or the son of one. The situation is complicated still further by the use of Old Testament names by Christians. The name Semuel — i.e. exactly the same form as in Stiehl 1970 — occurs in Syriac, not only in translations of the Old Testament but as the name of church officials, though this evidence is from later periods (Payne Smith 1879–1901: 4205). So, the occurrence of this name in Stiehl 1970 is not, of itself, proof that its bearer was a Jew, either ethnically or in religion.

By contrast, in the text from Tayma', 'ys1f, nbl' (if this is the correct reading), yaswp, and 'rmrn are all Jewish names without Ancient North or South Arabian parallels and, with the exception of yaswp, are either rare forms ('ys1h), or rarely attested names (nbl', 'rmrn), i.e. not the most obvious names for a convert to choose. This perhaps helps support the idea that their bearers were of Jewish origin, rather than Arab converts, and even, if the use of the Nabataean and Jewish Palestinian Aramaic form 'qym

It is for this reason that, in the transliteration above, the y in these names is printed in bold. As far as we know, the only scholar to make the correct reading of mwyh was J. Starcky, who mentions it in passing (1978: 47). However, it is not known whether he read 'dyn or 'dnw.

35 It is for this reason that, in the transliteration above, the y in these names is printed in bold. As far as we know, the only scholar to make the correct reading of mwyh was J. Starcky, who mentions it in passing (1978: 47). However, it is not known whether he read 'dywn or 'dnwn.


37 Yaswp is, of course, found in the form ys1f as the name of the Himyarite king who adopted Judaism. Indeed, in one inscription (Ja 1028/1,3) the name has the form Yas1f, where the use of the mater lectionis may suggest a direct borrowing from Hebrew/Aramaic. As Nebes points out, the fact that ys1f/yas1f is never given a patronym also suggests that he took this name from Hebrew/Aramaic as a symbolic gesture (2008: 26). We are most grateful to Peter Stein (personal communication) for all this information. The supposed occurrence of a name ys1f bn 'bd1 in ISB 330, is probably the result of a miscopying by Oxtoby. As Oxtoby himself suggests (1968: 92), the first name should probably be read ys1k. A ys1k bn 'bd1 is known from eight other Safaitic inscriptions.

38 On the form of the name Samawil, see Horovitz 1925: 179. Altheim and Stiehl (1968: 307, followed in Stiehl 1970: 89) suggest that Samwil was the ancestor of both 'dywn [scil. 'dywn] and mwnh [scil. mwyh], and while this is plausible, and perhaps supported by the fact that 'dywn would then bear the name of his paternal uncle, this is of course unprovable.

39 Newby (1988: 134, n. 21), suggests that the name hny in this text represents the Jewish name Honi, but this would have been spelt *hwny, and it is much more probable that it represents the Arabian name hny, which is extremely common in Safaitic (cf. Arabic Hunayn, see Caskel 1966, ii: 333b, and Gabir b. Hunayn (p. 250a) the Taghlibi poet. We are most grateful to Michael Lecher for this latter reference).

40 See for instance, the cases of the names Yunus and Ilyas discussed by Horovitz (1925: 26–27).

41 The name is still found at the time of the Prophet, in the form Samawil, as the name of a Medinan Jew, beside another form, Samwil (Horovitz 1925: 35).
rather than the Babylonian Jewish Aramaic ‘wqy is of any significance, that they were of Palestinian origin.

Gil attributed to Nau the statement that ‘almost all Jews mentioned during the Prophet’s lifetime have Arab names’. But this is too simplistic and, as Horovitz shows, the situation is far less clear-cut than this suggests, and should warn us that the automatic identification of religion and/or ethnicity on the basis of names is likely to be extremely misleading (see Macdonald 2009 II: 377–382; III: 47; IV: 187–189).

This new inscription from Taymā’ is of considerable interest, both historically and for what it contributes to our understanding of Nabataean palaeography and onomastics in North Arabia. However, like any new discovery, it raises more questions than it answers. It is hoped that there will be many more such finds in Taymā’ which will increase our knowledge, and point to further avenues of enquiry.

Sigla

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42 Gil 1984: 151. Nau did not actually say this, though he does quote Heller as saying that ‘sur soixante-sept noms de Juifs qui ont discuté avec Mahomet, trois seulement ... sont hébreux’ (1933: 116, but see the next note) and his thesis is that the Jews of Arabia at the time of Muhammad were almost entirely Arab proselytes and that their influence on the formation of Islam was far less than that of the Christians (1933: 113–122).

43 Horovitz 1925: 28–29, 35–37. We are most grateful to Michael Lecker for pointing out to us the Jewish names ‘Ašyā (possibly < Yesāyahu), Bārā, Finhās (< Pinēḥās), Sūriyā, and Yahudā (< Yēhūdā) in the Sirah of Ibn Hiṣam (pp. 351–352), on all of which see Horovitz 1925: 35–36. These names occur in a long list of Jews ‘who used to annoy the Apostle’, in which the vast majority of the names are ones also borne by Arabs.
References


