A Thamudic B Abecedary in the South Semitic Letter Order

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1 Introduction

The rock under consideration was discovered by Dr. Sabri Abbadi in 2004 during a survey in Wādī al-Ḥašād about 45 km to the northeast of aṣ-Ṣafawi, near the north-eastern border of Jordan. Dr. Ali al-Manaser kindly provided the photograph, but the exact location of the rock remains unknown. The obelisk-shaped slab of basalt, measuring 133 centimeters, from the base to the apex, by 34 centimeters, bears two Thamudic B inscriptions on a single face. While it is not unusual to encounter the occasional Thamudic B inscription in north-eastern Jordan and southern Syria, they are far more common in what is today Saudi Arabia. The significance of this particular find, however, lies in its contents. The inscriptions attest several unique letter shapes not known from elsewhere, unusual inscriptional formulae, and the first attestation of a Thamudic B abecedary, which follows the South Semitic order.

Before examining the texts themselves, a few remarks on the language inscribed in the Thamudic B script is in order. As is well known, Thamudic is a conventional label applied to the Ancient North Arabian (ANA) scripts which have not been precisely classified in any of the established categories; the term, therefore, does not refer to a single script, nor does it suggest that the scripts labeled Thamudic are more closely related to each other as opposed to other varieties of the South Semitic script. Our knowledge of the languages these scripts express is even more fragmentary. While it has been conventional to consider all of the varieties attested in the ANA scripts reflexes of a single language, there is no a priori reason to assume so. The different North Arabian epigraphic corpora are separated by great expanses of space and time, and to date no shared linguistic innovations to support the existence of an ANA subgrouping have been identified.

1 We thank Dr. Sabri Abbadi for giving us permission to publish this photograph.
2 The established categories include: Taymanitic, Dadanitic, Hismaic, and Safaitic (Macdonald 2000).
3 On this issue, see Al-Jallad 2015, especially n.12. We differ here from the recent assertion of Hayajneh (2011: 760) that Ancient North Arabian constitutes as single “linguistic area.”
Most Thamudic B inscriptions contain only a few words, primarily onomastica and short invocations to various deities. But even these brief texts can testify to considerable internal linguistic diversity, which could signal both regional and chronological variation. For example, word final triphthongs/diphthongs are often preserved, but can occasionally collapse to a vowel: for instance, the divine name */ruḍaw-/ is spelled as both ṛd but more commonly as ṛdw. One of the unique features common in the Thamudic B inscriptions is the particle *nm, which is no doubt a reflex of *lm, the dative preposition plus an enclitic mem, with regressive assimilation. Nevertheless, the basic form l is sometimes attested. Beside the definite article h-, ’l is very rarely attested (see, for example, WTI-Thamudic 25). Other notable grammatical features include the consonantal reflex of the first person singular clitic pronoun -y (Macdonald 2004: 507), the ’- causative prefix (see 1a below), and the leveling of the -t suffixes to the first person of the suffix conjugation, ṛf’t ‘I am healed’ (Hayajneh 2011: 770). One of the most obvious gaps in our knowledge concerns the lexicon. Many of the bizarre translations found in the text editions suggest that the reliance on the Classical Arabic lexicons as the sole point of reference is misguided. As will be seen, two important terms in 1a found better semantic matches in Ancient South Arabian (ASA) and Hebrew rather than Classical Arabic. Clearly, the process of linguistic decipherment is still underway, and much more work is needed to determine the linguistic character and affiliation of the varieties attested in the Thamudic scripts.

2 The Texts

2.1 Text 1

The first text has two components: (a) a building and prayer text and (b) a partial abecedary in the South Semitic order. The text curves around the edge of the face starting at the bottom right, with each of its components sharing roughly an equal portion of the stone.

4 Knauf (2009: 481) has suggested that this particle functions as a direct object marker. In some cases, however, it seems to have an introductory or presentative function as well.