

Arabian *faḥr* and *mubālaḡa* of High Rhetorical Value: A New Comprehensive View of the Nemara Inscription

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1 Introductory Remark and Dedication

Since its discovery and *editio princeps* in 1902, now more than hundred years ago, more than one hundred scholarly papers have investigated the Nemara inscription. Many of these readings and linguistic and historical interpretations have been the subject of scholarly dispute und dissension.

Intimidated, if not frightened, by the announcement of my eminent American colleague Michael Zwettler, that he is preparing a full-fledged monograph on the Nemara inscription of which he has already presented three rather voluminous chapters in the form of pre-published articles, it is only with some reluctance that I, as mainly a meek Éthiopian, am offering this minor contribution to the volume of studies in honour of the eminent Arabist Pierre Larcher. It contains my findings and thoughts on this early example of Arabic *faḥr* “boast” and *mubālaḡa* “hyperbole” since the publication of my previous instalments.

2 Preliminary Considerations

While, until now, interpretative studies of the Nemara inscription have concentrated on analyzing every linguistic and historical detail of the text in order to squeeze out primary source details about the political, cultural, and linguistic history of the Arabian peninsula in the 4th century AD, taking more or less all the information for granted and true, in the following, an approach from another angle is given preference. The text will be seen and analyzed not in its fundamental details, but as a well-constructed and organised complete piece of Arabian rhetoric, precisely of *faḥr* “boast” and *mubālaḡa* “hyperbole.” According to this textual genre, in fact, the details are subordinated to the general purpose—its persuasive and propagandistic character. In this address meant for everlasting glory in the future and—as indicated by the language—for Ara-

bian posterity details seemingly hypercorrect and precise may be half true, exaggerated, and even purely invented. Thus, to do justice to this early masterpiece of Arabic literature one has to define the guidelines of the rhetorical discourse and demonstrate how the logical, syntactical, and stylistic construction and devices serve this purpose. In other words: an analysis which detects or decodes a fluent, theme-driven and linear texture from the first word to the last syntagma is to be preferred to a disorganised agglomeration of details which certainly is most precious for a modern historian but less impressive to the presumed contemporary Arabic reader, the ultimate target of the whole effort in composing and publishing.

Following this programmatic approach the article presents, after the first elementary information on the Nemara inscription, an overall translation and interpretation offering a number of elements not contained in the numerous studies since its discovery. The arguments for this are given, discussing palaeographic, orthographic, and grammatical peculiarities, as well as matters of style. In the last section, there are considerations about personalities, peoples and tribes, places, and other material facts mentioned. These last ones will in most cases only be alluded to, being that they are mainly discussed in the previous studies. This does not mean that they don't need further research in the future in the light of incessant new epigraphic material being discovered all over the Arabian peninsula. But the interpretation of all this stands now under the general suspicion of pure name-dropping in the text, albeit not without plausibility.

3 Necessary Basic Information

The inscription of en-Nemara is preserved in the Louvre Museum (no: A 4083) and unfortunately has been broken into two pieces due to an accident during its transport to the *Maison du Monde Arabe* for a recent exposition. It consists of 5 lines, ca. 50 words and 177 signs (ligatures counted separately) written in a *tabula ansata* in near to "standard" Nabataean script but in a language near to what later was labelled "Classical (North) Arabic." The surface of the basaltic stone is uneven and porous, a great number of natural little holes can deceive the eye and may appear as elements of the script. The stonemason did not bother with the evenness of his writing surface and did not pay much attention to the precision of his work. The letters occur in widely divergent shapes and the disposition and dimensions of the words vary a significant amount. Only recently have some excellent photographs taken by the department of Oriental Antiquities in the Louvre been published. Nevertheless, even these cannot