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## The Earliest Classical Arabic Poem Recorded in Writing

### Abstract

The ‘Ayn ‘Abadat, Namarah, Umm al-Jimal, and Raqqush inscriptions are considered by some as the only Nabataean inscriptions containing clear Arabic language that can be identified with Classical Arabic. However, the ‘Ayn ‘Abadat inscription is the most important among them for few reasons: First, it is the oldest of the four. Second, it contained beautifully and perfectly composed Classical Arabic poem, making it the only material evidence we have for the existence of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Third, the two poem verses included in this inscription were provided eloquent analysis of the complex philosophical topic of life, death, and after life, from a pre-Islamic, pagan point of view. Fourth, because this inscription was found in the Negev Desert, far from Makka, it clearly reinforces the fact that Classical Arabic was not the language of Quraysh or any other Arab tribal group, or was tied to a specific geographical area in Arabia. Fifth, the fact that the two poem verses were written in Classical Arabic language within a fully Aramaic text can help identify the relation between the two languages and explain the nature and usages of Classical Arabic, in general. Sixth, the sophisticated language of the Arabic poem of this inscription illustrated few important linguistic and grammatical usages.

### The ‘Ayn ‘Abdāt Inscription (88-125 CE)

The ‘Ayn ‘Abdat inscription included the oldest fully Classical Arabic text recorded in writing before Islam. It is the only material evidence we have for a Classical Arabic poem in that period. The inscription was dated between 88 CE to 125 CE. It is therefore, an undisputed evidence Classical Arabic poems existed long centuries before Islam. Taken together with the exhaustive Namara Nabataean inscription (328 CE), also written in flawless Arabic Language, <sup>[1]</sup> it is clear that Classical Arabic was used many centuries before Islam and the Quran.

This inscription was first introduced to the scholarly community in 1986, by Professor Avraham Negev of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. According to an article by Negev, it was discovered in 1979 by E. Orion, just outside the historical Nabataean city of ‘Abdāt, in the Negev desert. <sup>[5]</sup> The city of ‘Abdāt was established around 300 BCE, and was the second most important Nabataean city after Petra from the first century BCE until the beginning of the seventh century CE, when it was destroyed completely by a violent earthquake. It is believed that the Nabataean King Obados the First (96-85 BCE) is buried in this city.

The 'Ayn 'Abdāt inscription was first pictured and traced by Ada Yardeni in 1982.<sup>[5]</sup> It included six lines of text, all written in the Nabataean script. The first three and the sixth lines were written in the Aramaic language, according to Negev, but the fourth and fifth lines were clearly written in Classical Arabic language. The initial paragraph in the three Aramaic lines spoke of a person named *Jurmillāhī bir Taymallāhī* calling for prayers and offering a statue to his god 'Abdāt, possibly King Obados the First (96-85 BCE). Unfortunately the second line was severely damaged and cannot be read. The sixth and last line restated the name *Jurmillāhī*, and indicated that he was the writer of the inscription, the author of the poem, or possibly both.



A picture of the 'Ayn 'Abdāt Inscription stone by *Ada Yardeni*.<sup>[5]</sup>

The entire inscription was initially read by J. Naveh and S. Shaked.<sup>[5]</sup> In 1990, Professor Bellamy of the University of Michigan provided a new reading of the two Arabic lines, based entirely on Yardeni's tracing of the stone.<sup>[2]</sup> Despite their reading differences of the two Arabic lines, Naveh and Bellamy agreed on the main theme of the inscription, which they explained primarily through their readings of the Arabic poem.

According to Yardeni's tracing, which was fully adopted by Bellamy except for reading the word ارد ارد, the whole inscription can literally be translated from the Nabataean as follows:<sup>[5]</sup>

ذكير بطب قرا قدس عبتت الها وذكير  
من [.....]  
جرم الهي بر تيم الهي صلّم لقبل عبتت الها  
فيفعلو لا فدا ولا اثرا فكن هنا يبغنا الموتو لا  
ابغه فكن هنا ارد جرحو لا يردنا  
جرم الهي كتب يده

In their readings, Naveh and Shaked translated the text of the two Arabic lines in modern literary Arabic and organized it as follows:

فيفعل لا فدى ولا اثرا. فكان ان يبغنا الموت لا ابغه. فكان ان اراد جرح لا يردنا<sup>[5]</sup>

Naveh and Shaked then explained the above as follows:

And he acts neither for benefit nor for favour. And if death claims us let me not be claimed. And if affliction seeks, let it not seek us. <sup>[5]</sup>

As mentioned above, Bellamy changed the word ارد to اد in his new reading of the two Arabic lines, citing a Bedouin conjuration from al-*Zamakhsharī* اَعَزَمَ عَلَيْكَ اِيهَا الْجَرْحُ اِنْ لَا تَزِيدُ وَلَا تَدِيدُ. <sup>[8]</sup> He then assumed this word was اَدَادَ, a noun of a verb in the meaning of “become infected, suppurate”, which was combined with the following noun word to form the expression اَدَادَ جَرْحٌ. However, the soft diacritics of this combined expression do not match correctly according to the Arabic grammar rule regarding المضاف والمضاف اليه. Furthermore, according to *Lisān al-‘Arab*, the word اَدَادَ also means “an amazing or incredible matter” which is a more appropriate meaning. <sup>[4]</sup> Based on his reading, Bellamy re-wrote the two lines in the form of three classical Arabic poem hemistiches, as follows: <sup>[2]</sup>

فيفعلُ لا فِداً ولا اثرا  
فكان هُنَا يَبْفِنَا الموتُ لا اَبْغَاهُ  
فكان هُنَا اَدَادَ جَرْحٌ لا يَرْدِنَا

Then, he explained the three verses together as follows:

For (Obodas -the god-) works without reward or favour, and he, when death tried to claim us, did not let it claim (us), for when a wound (of ours) festered, he did not let us perish. <sup>[2]</sup>

Both Bellamy and Naveh thought the writer was speaking about an actual wound. Naveh thought he was praying to the god to protect him from death or fatal injury. Bellamy thought he was thanking the god for his recovery from one. Thinking that this inscription was speaking about an actual wound is the common believe in the scholarly circles today. For example, based on Bellamy’s updated reading, Hoyland gave only a slightly different translation, as follows:

For he [Obodas -the god-] acts [expecting] no reward nor predilection. Though death has often sought us out, he afforded it no occasion; though I have often encountered wounding, he has not let it be my destruction. <sup>[3]</sup>

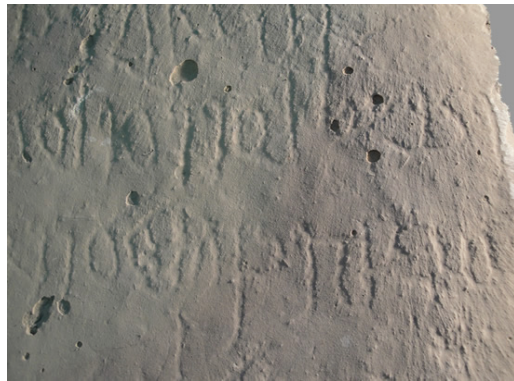
Because of the usual complex language and metaphors employed in Classical Arabic poetry, I believe a better reading of the two-line poem based on Yardeni’s original tracing and Bellamy’s reading of it should be:

فيفعلُ لا فِداً ولا اثرا      فِكان هُنَا يَبْفِنَا  
الموتُ لا اَبْغَاهُ فِكان هُنَا      اَدَادَ جَرْحٌ لا يَرْدِنَا

However, after carefully tracing the inscription in Yardeni’s picture, I arrived to a new Arabic transliteration from the Nabataean, which differs with her tracing and Naveh and Shaked’s reading in four locations that will be pointed out in bold, below. Particularly, it updates Yardeni’s tracing in four words at the beginning of the first and fifth lines. It is very clear in Yardeni’s picture, and even in her own tracing, the letter *Hā* of the word اَبْغَاهُ in the beginning of the sixth line was a medial shape *Hā*. Furthermore, the letter *Fā* of the

following word فكن was actually the letter Wāw and it was visibly attached to that letter Hā'. As for the letter Kāf in the word فكن, it seems to me a clear letter Mīm.

After examining another zoomed-in image showing the first few words of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> lines, I am convinced the letter sequence of the second line (4<sup>th</sup> line) was ابغهو من هنا ادد. Please examine that zoomed-in image and the tracing image below it, which are provided in the next page. Clearly the letter Hā' was in its initial shape and it was connected to the following letter Wāw, which was followed in turn by a classical Nabataean letter Mīm in its initial form. The sand specks below the lower left-pointing tail of the letter Wāw are not part of that letter.



A zoomed-in picture of the 'Ayn 'Abdāt inscription stone area containing the first few words of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> lines which included Arabic poetry.

The following image incorporates my new tracing corrections and updates Yardeni's original tracing image:



And here is my new updated literal translation of the inscription:

ذكير لمنقرا قدس عبتد الها وذكير  
 [...]من [...].....  
 جرم الهي بر تيم الهي صللم لقبيل عبتد الها  
 فيفعلو لا فدا ولا اثرا فكن هنا يبغنا الموتو لا  
 ابغهو من هنا ادد جرحو لا يردنا  
 جرم الهي كتب يده

As for the word ادد, I believe there are two other possibilities to read it. First, it could be أدد or أدد and both are related to the Arabic word أذى as in يؤذى, in the meaning of suffering and pain, according to *Lisān al-‘Arab*.<sup>[4]</sup> Second, it could actually be the two words إذ ذا, also based on *Lisān al-‘Arab*, which explained that the demonstrative pronoun إذ was initially the letter *Dhāl* alone, used with soft *fathah* diacritic sound when pointing to masculine object and with soft *kasrah* diacritic sound when pointing to a feminine object.<sup>[4]</sup>

After re-arranging the words in the Arabic poem text of the fourth and fifth lines, and after adding soft vowel diacritics, dots, and missing letters *Alif*, I concluded four possible Classical Arabic poem readings, as follows:

Or:	فكان هنا يببفنا أدد جرح لا يردنا	فيفعل لا فدا ولا أثرا الموت لا أبغه من هنا
Or:	فكان هنا يببفنا أدد جرح لا يردنا	فيفعل لا فدا ولا أثرا الموت لا أبغه من هنا
Or:	فكان هنا يببفنا أذ جرح لا يردنا	فيفعل لا فدا ولا أثرا الموت لا أبغه من هنا
Or:	فكان هنا يببفنا إذ جرح لا يردنا	فيفعل لا فدا ولا أثرا الموت لا أبغه من هنا

After discussing my first three readings with the prominent Iraqi poet *Saadī Yūsuf*, he suggested the forth one and corrected the soft diacritics in few words. He further indicated that these verses could be in *al-Basīṭ* البسيط not *al-Ṭawīl* الطويل, as Bellamy thought. Another prominent Iraqi poet, ‘*Abd al-Razzāq ‘Abd al-Wāḥid*, thought the two verses were not rhymed according to any Classical Arabic poetry standard. The talented Iraqi poet, *Ṣalāḥ ‘Awwād* believes the fourth reading is the most likely one. He thinks while the verses do have some indications for *al-Ṭawīl* الطويل they were actually in *al-Rajz* الرجز, and particularly in *Majzū’ al-Rajz* مجزوء الرجز (portioned *Rajz*) which is quite common in Classical Arabic poetry. My English translations of the two poem verses, based on the three distinct meanings of the word ادد of my new four readings above, and even based on my new revised version of Bellamy’s reading of Yardeni’s tracing, are as follow:

It (death) will act regardless of offering or predilection, for it is in here (life) to seek us.  
Death, which I do not seek from here (life), is an amazing act: a wound that does not kill us.

Or:

It (death) will act regardless of offering or predilection, for it is in here (life) to seek us.  
Death, which I do not seek from here (life), is a suffering: a wound that does not kill us.

Or:

It (death) will act regardless of offering or predilection, for it is in here (life) to seek us.  
Death, I do not seek from here (life), because it is only a wound that does not kill us.

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