The Safaitic Database Online

As most of you will know, the Safaitic inscriptions are graffiti carved by nomads of the Syro-Arabian deserts roughly between the first century BC and the fourth century AD. With the possible exception of the public inscriptions from the ancient oasis of Dadan, they are the most informative of all the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions both linguistically and in terms of their content. They therefore illuminate the way-of-life, environment, social structures, and beliefs of a section of the population of what is now southern Syria, Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia, for which we have few other sources, and none so direct and personal. They also provide an insight into the emotions of the people who carved them, which, again, is unique in this region and this period.

The number of Safaitic inscriptions known today is approximately 30,000, though not all these have been published and at least 2000 are inaccessible in Masters and Doctoral theses. Others are awaiting publication in those triumphs of hope over experience known as "Macdonald forthcoming", for which *mea maxima culpa*! This 30,000 is only a fraction of those <u>waiting</u> to be recorded, as anyone who travels in the Syro -Arabian deserts, particularly the *ḥarra*, or desert of broken-up lava flows, will know. These vast numbers of graffiti by an almost equally vast number of different authors — texts by the same author are surprisingly rare — in an area which can never have supported a very large population, suggest that there must have been almost universal literacy among the nomads of the region at the turn of the era. The fact that they seem to have used this literacy entirely to carve <u>graffiti</u> is a phenomenon I have explored elsewhere, and need not detain us here.

Unfortunately, the Safaitic inscriptions have not been published in a way which is particularly accessible either to those wishing to study them for their own sake, or indeed to scholars in other fields seeking the information they can provide. As in all volumes of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, that devoted to Safaitic published in 1950–1951, provides transliterations in the Hebrew alphabet and translations and commentaries in Latin, a language which alas is no longer the *lingua franca* of scholarship. However, much <u>more</u> disabling is the fact that it has no <u>index</u> and so it is virtually impossible to discover all the examples of a particular name, word or grammatical structure, apart from the cross-references given in the commentaries, which alas all too often end with the abbreviation "etc.". In addition, the copies of the inscriptions shown on the plates are arranged under the numbers they were given in their <u>original</u> publications, not by their Corpus numbers. This is even the case

with the huge collection of inscriptions recorded by M. and Mme Dunand which makes up over half the volume. These were previously unpublished, but are still arranged on the plates under the field numbers given them by the Dunands. The volume is thus very unwieldy to use, and a grave discouragement to students.

On top of this, as with inscriptions of other types, large numbers of Safaitic graffiti have been published in journal articles which are often difficult to keep track of, or even to find.

There are, of course, collections with indexes which are more approachable, such as that published in 1943 by Enno Littmann in the series of reports of the *Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria*. This was the first to place the copies of the inscriptions beside the transliterations, translations and commentaries, an example followed in recent times by several Saudi scholars, notably Khaled al-Eskoubi in his editions of Taymanitic, Hismaic and Thamudic texts from near Taymāʾ. However, the majority of editions of Safaitic inscriptions have not alas followed Littmann in this.

This brings us to another problem, which is that the vast majority of published Safaitic inscriptions are known only from copies made in the field, very often made by people who could not read, let alone understand, what they were copying, either because they were doing so before the decipherment of the script, or (like the Dunands) because they had never learnt to read them. In Littmann's otherwise wholly admirable edition, only 60% of the copies were made by Littman himself (who was the only Semitist on the expedition), the other 40% were made by the camp servants during their spare time.

In the days when photography was far more difficult and expensive than it is now, most expeditions did not "waste" photographs on graffiti and kept their precious film for monumental inscriptions. As far as I know, in the field, even Littmann photographed only four of the 1300 Safaitic graffiti he and others on the expeditions recorded. Later, even when a much larger proportion of the texts was photographed, such as on the expeditions of Fred Winnett and Gerald Lankester Harding, the prohibitive cost of publishing the prints meant that only small selections were included in the editions and the vast majority of texts were published as tracings from photographs, or field copies.

This has resulted in a number of problems:

1). Since the vast majority of Safaitic inscriptions have been published only as field copies, often of dubious accuracy, in reading them one is often trying to second-guess the copyist: i.e. what letter could lie behind the bizarre unrecognizable shape he has produced. Naturally, one can never be sure that one's interpretation, especially when it involves emendations, actually reflects what the original author had carved.

2). When an inscription is known only from a copy on the page, the reader is driven even further from the original graffito in its context than when studying it from a photograph. What the author chiselled, hammered, incised, or scratched on an irregular stone surface, has been filtered through a third party's skill at drawing, or lack of it, and reduced to lines on a page existing in a vacuum. There is no indication of the often tortured shape of the rock which may have affected the form of a letter, the patch that was covered with lichen where the copyist could not see what had been carved, the fact that the text ran over onto another face which the copyist didn't notice, or the extra lines added to certain letters by ingenious vandals making them look like other letters or simply reducing the text to nonsense, etc. This abstraction of the text from its context, and the frequent need to second-guess the copyist, only encouraged what I have called the "philological gymnastics" of more imaginative epigraphists, who felt a freedom to emend at will and who all too often lost sight of the milieu of the real people whose utterances they were interpreting.

Thus, despite their numbers, the Safaitic inscriptions are difficult of access; the vast majority are published without photographs, and it is hard, if not impossible, for most people to search them all for examples of names, words, grammatical features, content, etc.

It was this which led Gerald Lankester Harding to compile his *Index and Concordance Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions*. Originally, he did so on index cards purely for his own use, and it was F.V. Winnett who persuaded him to publish it in 1971. Harding was well-aware of some of its short-comings and others were pointed out in the reviews, but it has remained the only comprehensive index of names of Ancient North and South Arabian inscriptions for the last 40 years. Of course, there are occasional mistakes or misreadings, but then no scholar worth the name would use such a book without checking the sources cited. It also provides an invaluable concordance of the inscriptions published up to 1969 (when it was sent to the press) and this, together with the list of abbreviations is really the only guide to all the places where the inscriptions were published. For me, it's greatest fault, however, is the use of the abbreviation "etc." Harding had on the index cards every attestation

of every name he had found in the Ancient North and South Arabian inscriptions. However, in the publication, he limited himself to four (and sometimes fewer) examples from each publication. Unfortunately, some years after the publication, at a time when he was moving house, he burnt all the index cards. At the time of his death in 1979, he was working on a dictionary of ANA but alas this has never seen the light of day. *Mea culpa* again.

From 1979–1983, when I was working for Yarmouk University as the director of the Corpus of the Inscriptions of Jordan Project, I organized for the University the compilation of an *Apparatus criticus* project covering all types of ANA inscription. Of course, this was done on index cards since computers were in their infancy. The late Geraldine King did most of the work and eventually we had catalogued every variant reading or interpretation of every Ancient North Arabian inscription. When we left the University, this enormous database remained in the Centre for Jordanian Studies which was the body under which the Corpus Project came at the time, but I imagine that when the Epigraphy section of the Institute, now Faculty, of Archaeology and Anthropology was set up it was moved there. I am happy to say that I have recently been told that the Corpus of the Inscriptions of Jordan Project is being revived and I have suggested that updating and digitizing this resource would be an excellent project for it to undertake.

I also collected for the Corpus Project a huge archive of photographs of Ancient North Arabian inscriptions in Jordan, running into many thousands of b/w prints and colour slides, so that inscriptions published only from field copies or tracings but for which photos existed, could be checked and eventually new editions published. In addition, I led expeditions to places where inscriptions had been copied in earlier times and made a photographic record of them, which was added to this archive. I presume that this, like the card index database is still at Yarmouk and it would be excellent if it could now be digitized and made available on the internet.

This then was the situation when in 1994, I decided that it would useful to create a computer database of all the Safaitic inscriptions then known. I was extremely fortunate that at the time Laïla Nehmé had just finished her doctorate and Javier Teixidor suggested that she should come and help me. She and I worked for ten days setting up the basic structure: I asking for the impossible and she arguing to make sure I really needed it and then finding ways of putting it into practice! At the time, I knew nothing of the capabilities and limitations of digital databases and I owe almost everything I know to her patient tuition. A year later I was

awarded a three-year Leverhulme Fellowship to develop the database and Laïla was awarded a one-year research assistantship at Oxford to work with me on it.

On Laïla's recommendation, we established the Safaitic Database on Macintosh in an application called *4th Dimension*. This was a relational database which thus allowed us to have databases of inscriptions, rock-drawings, bibliography, and photographs all linked to each other **[show family-tree]**. Within each of these it was possible to search. So, for instance, one could find all the rock-drawings showing "hunting" **[show]**. In my attempt to include all the available ancillary information on each inscription, I created an unrealistically large number of fields as you can **[show record for HCH 79]** I say "unrealistically" because with so many inscriptions to enter, including all this information was going to take an extremely long time. Moreover, some of this data was not available in the original editions of the texts but required each inscription to be studied and analysed. Thus, it was necessary to check all texts for the analysis of the subject matter, and those for which we had photographs for the type of script, whether the name was distinguished from the rest of the text by the size or the type of letters, the technique used to carve the inscription and whether there were special forms of one or more letters. This meant that there were very few people who could enter data and in fact, it was done at different periods entirely by Laïla Nehmé, Geraldine King, and myself. It is for this reason that it has taken so long, since clearly we all had many other commitments as well. This is certainly a lesson worth learning and a problem which I think the database of Arabic inscriptions founded by Solange Ory at about the same time came up against.

[Show SD in list]As you will see, at present we have 27,347 inscriptions in the database. This includes all published texts and some 3300 recorded by Geraldine King during the Basalt Desert Rescue Survey in north-eastern Jordan in 1989, which she had prepared for publication before her untimely death in 2009. It also includes, approximately 3,700 inscriptions recorded at the site of al-Isawi in the Wadi Sham in the *ḥarra* of southern Syria, which I have not yet published.

In addition, there are approximately another 3000 which we know of but have not yet had the chance to enter.

At the time the Safaitic volume of the *Corpus* was published in 1950, all but a couple of hundred of the inscriptions had been found in Syria and with the exception of a dozen or so, none of these had been photographed. In addition, the places where most of them had been found had not been placed on maps with any accuracy (mostly because the maps were not

available at the time) nor had they been systematically related to the topography of the surrounding areas. It therefore seemed sensible to me to set up, in parallel with the Safaitic Database, a programme of fieldwork to find the sites where Safaitic inscriptions had been recorded in the 19th and early 20th century, place their locations on maps and make a photographic record of the inscriptions. This project was called the *Safaitic Epigraphic Survey Programme* and it operated between 1996 and 2003 under the auspices of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, co-directed by Mme Muna Al-Mu'azzin and myself. We did indeed locate all but a handful of the sites where inscriptions had previously been found, though alas GPS had not been invented when we began and was still not permitted in Syria when we finished, so the process of putting them on maps was very cumbersome. However, we now have photographs of a number of the inscriptions published in the *Corpus* and by Littmann and this has enabled us to produce revised readings of many of the texts.

* * *

[**Show input page of SD**] Because of the informal nature of the Safaitic inscriptions and the fact that a large proportion of the texts were known only from hand copies of uncertain accuracy, there is a far greater range of readings of any particular text than there would be, say, of an Ancient South Arabian inscription. For this reason, we realized when we set up the database, that we would often feel the need to re-read and/or reinterpret the texts we were entering. However, those using the database would obviously search it using the reading in the original publication or a well-known re-edition of it such as the *Corpus*. We therefore placed the SD reading in the "text field" but added a field just below it for the original or *Corpus* reading. To make it clear whether the reading in the text field was that of the editors of the SD or of the *editio princeps* or another publication, a field was added to show this and a similar one for the origin of the translation. Many of the inscriptions had a sizable *apparatus criticus* and a field was made for this too, so that the user could test the reading and translations proposed by the SD against previous suggestions.

The other reason for including the "C reading" field was that it was hoped that one of uses of the database would be to produce an index of the Safaitic volume of the *Corpus*. Given the advances in the field since it was published, it seemed unhelpful simply to include the readings as published, and we intended to add the material from up-dated readings with cross-references between them and the original ones.

* * *

In 2010, the University of Oxford agreed to set up a new website called *Ancient Arabia: Languages and Cultures* based at the Khalili Research Centre of the Oriental Institute. The aim of this site was to make available collections of inscriptions and other documents from, or relating to, ancient Arabia. This is defined as the Peninsula with to the north a fluid border stretching into modern Jordan and Syria, and chronologically from remote pre-history to the emergence of Islam, though no hard and fast boundaries, either geographical or chronological, are imposed.

On this website, we will be putting within the next couple of months Geraldine King's thesis, which is still, twenty years after it was submitted, the fundamental study of the Hismaic inscriptions; her major report on the still undeciphered inscriptions in Dhofar, together with her photographs and the remarkable concordance of them she made by creating a font representing the letter forms; as well as much else. In particular, this website will host the Safaitic Database which will then become the Safaitic Database Online.

This development obviously involves a number of changes. Since the KRC's IT specialist Dan Burt could not be here, I am afraid you will have to make do with my brief and probably rather garbled version of the technical details.

Firstly, the *4th Dimension* application used for the original version was not suitable for use on the internet and so the database was converted to FileMakerPro Server.

Secondly, the font used for the transliterations in the original database was not Unicode compliant and so had to be changed to one that was. This involved not only the text field but most of the others as well.

Thirdly, we have followed the CSAI in its simplified transliteration system for the purposes of searching, i.e. "d." for *ḍ* etc.

Fourthly, it will be possible to include the photographs and tracings on the pages next to the transliterations.

Since the website has not yet gone public I can't access it outside Oxford University. However, my IT colleague, Dan Burt, has done some page mock-ups to give you an idea of what to expect.**[show the sample pages]**

http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/aalc/index.php/projects/safaitic-database-online

The AALC project has now been running for just under one year and we are seeking funding for another three years. By the end of this initial year, we will have, among much else, set up a sample of the Safaitic Database Online to show what can be done. This consists of the 3420 previously unpublished Safaitic texts from Geraldine King's Basalt Desert Rescue Survey, which will act as an example of what we intend to do for the rest the inscriptions. This has involved not only the conversion of the database to form suitable for online use, but the scanning of some 10,000 b/w negatives, colour slides and tracings on acetate, so that these can be added to the database.

We are anxious to learn as much as possible from the experience of others and so any suggestions, criticisms, and comments before we start on phase II later in the year would be very gratefully accepted. It is also extremely important to us that the Safaitic Database Online (and the others I shall mention in a moment) should be fully compatible with the DASI and the others on which you are working.

Of course, there will need to be a lengthy process of checking all the readings, translations etc. which, alas, is at present something that no one on the team except me can do. But we hope to have this sample of the database available on the website from October of this year. After that, if we get the money for the second stage of the project we will put the rest of the database online, but that will involve the scanning of vast quantities of photographs, facsimiles and hand copies as well as all the checking of the material. So, if anyone knows of someone who would like to come and help we would be overjoyed! The result we are aiming for is a fully searchable online database which would provide a new corpus of all known Safaitic inscriptions with as much ancillary data about each one and photographs and facsimiles for as many as possible.

I should just mention that we are also constructing a database of the Hismaic inscriptions, based on the material in Geraldine King's thesis, which should be ready for the website within the first year of phase II of the AALC project. I also have a database of all the inscriptions of all sorts in the area of Taymāʾ, this numbers approximately 1000 entries. It is hoped that one will soon be created for Dadanitic (formerly Lihyanite).

The most difficult texts for which to make a database, are those in what I have called the "Thamudic pending file", i.e. those which are in Ancient North Arabian scripts and assumed to be in ANA dialects but which have been insufficiently studied to be interpreted with any certainty. To add to the problems, most are still known only from dubious hand copies made by early travellers. Until we have a sufficient number of photographs to

reassess them all that can be said is that the majority of interpretations in earlier editions, such as those of van den Branden, and even many of those of Winnett, are unconvincing.