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The Old Arabic graffito at Jabal Usays: A new reading of line 1

M.C.A. MACDONALD

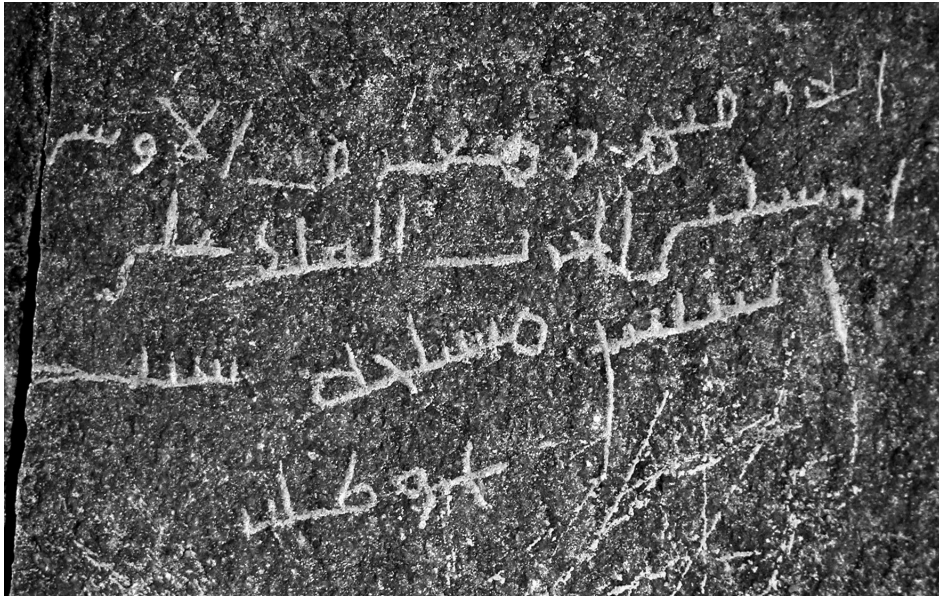


FIGURE 1. *The Old Arabic graffito at Jabal Usays.*
(Photograph M.C.A. Macdonald, 2006).

The history of the study of the Old Arabic graffito at Jabal Usays¹ is outlined by Pierre Larcher in this volume. Here, I would like to present a new reading of the first line which has been made possible by a photograph I took at the site in November 2006.² I have published a note on this elsewhere (2009).³ However, since the inscription is mentioned several times in the present volume, it seemed sensible to include, for the convenience of the reader, a discussion of my new reading, together with the photograph (Fig. 1).

¹ *Usays* is the ancient name as recorded in Safaitic inscriptions (Macdonald Al Mu'azzin & Nehmé 1996: 466, and in the Old Arabic graffito as shown by the new reading published by Robin & Gorea 2002: 507, 509). *Jabal Says* is the modern name give in the *Official Standard Names Gazetteer* for Syria (Washington, DC, 1967) and on maps, Google Earth, etc.

² Although I made this new reading available to Pierre Larcher before the Special Session in July 2009, he preferred to retain those arguments in his paper which are based on previous readings (see Larcher, this volume: 106, n. 2).

³ The photograph mentioned in that note is on p. 120 of *Semitica et Classica* 2.

In 2002, Robin and Gorea read line 1 as ʾnh(.) *Qtm* bn Mg(y)r(h) ʾl- ʾwsy.⁴ He later changed this to “*Je suis Ruqaym, fils de Muʿriḍ l’Awsite*”.⁵ Independently, I had reached the same reading of the first name, i.e. *rqym*. The *r* is clear on the new photograph, as it is in the next word, *br*, showing that the traditional reading of this word is correct, as opposed to Robin’s suggestion to read *bn* here and in the other pre-Islamic inscriptions in the Arabic script (Robin & Gorea 2006: 508). Compare the *r* of *rqym* and *br* with those in ʾrslny and ʾl-ḥrt in line 2.

Aramaic *br* for Arabic *bn* also occurs in the Namārah inscription (AD 328), which is otherwise in the Old Arabic language expressed in the Nabataean Aramaic script, and is found together with several other Aramaic words and phrases (*šlm*, *dkyr*, *b-ṭb*, etc.) in graffiti in the

⁴ Robin & Gorea 2002: 507; Robin 2006: 331, (uncertain readings in roman type). This reading was based on Robert Hoyland’s photograph taken in 2001.

⁵ Robin 2008: 178. Only the translation was published, with uncertain readings in roman type. This was based on my photograph (see Fig. 1).

Nabataean script in Sinai and north-west Arabia. In some of the latter, Arabic words, phrases, and/or syntax occur, suggesting that they were composed by Arabic-speakers (see, for instance, Nehmé, this volume: 69 JSNab 18, 71 S 1, 76 UJadh 109). These Aramaic words seem to have been used roughly in the same way as we employ such Latin expressions as *pace*, *caveat emptor*, *sine qua non*, or the way that the Latin vocative and ablative in the word *Jesu* are preserved in some English prayers of the Anglican church, etc. Such a usage does not “mettre en doute la cohérence linguistique” of the texts in which they occur (Robin & Gorea 2002: 508), but is simply a relic of a learned or written language which is being, or has been, displaced as the spoken one is increasingly used for writing.

In the second name, the first three letters are clearly *m-^c/ġ-r/z*. The last letter is clearly a *f*, and cannot be a *d* as suggested by Robin (2008: 178). The tail of final *s/d* in both Nabataean and early Arabic always runs downwards, not horizontally/diagonally, and the top of the original stem is always present as a short vertical line immediately to the left of the loop, as it still is in modern forms of the Arabic script.⁶

By contrast, from at least the second century AD in

scribal hands and perhaps a century later in inscriptions, the *final* form of *f*, has virtually no stem and is simply a loop with a long horizontal/diagonal tail, even though its initial/medial form often retains the original vertical stem, which, however, never rises above the loop as it does in *s/d*. Compare the shape here (AD 528/529) with that in the name *ywsp* at the end of line 2 in the Nabataean inscription from Taymā³ dated to AD 203 (al-Najem & Macdonald 2009: 209), in the same name in the “transitional” texts in Nehmé, this volume: Fig. 27 line 2, Fig. 41 line 1, and in the word *yastankif* in the north and north-east sections of the mosaic inscription in the inner octagonal arcade of the Dome of the Rock (AD 692). The second name must therefore read *m-^c/ġ-r/z-f* and of these possibilities only *m^crf* would seem to produce a recognizable name: *Mu^carrif*. I am most grateful to Pierre Larcher (personal communication) for telling me that this name is used today and to Robert Hoyland (personal communication) for the information that, though uncommon, it is known from texts of the early Islamic period.⁷ Thus the first line would now read:

ʾnh rḡym br m^crf ʾl-ʾwsy

“I, Ruḡaym son of Mu^carrif the Awsite....”

⁶ For Nabataean, see the script table on Macdonald 2003: 53, fig. 38, where in line 15 the final forms of *s/d* and *p/f* in a Nabataean scribal hand can be compared. For early Arabic, see Gruendler 1993: 69–71.

⁷ See, for instance, Mu^carrif ibn Wāṣil in Ibn Saʿd 1957–1960: 1.389, 5.403, 6.45, 100, 356.

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