

RESEARCH ARTICLE

DOCUMENTING AND INTERPRETING JORDAN'S EPIGRAPHIC HERITAGE: ANALYSIS OF NEW ANCIENT NORTHERN ARABIAN EPIGRAPHIC MATERIAL FROM THE ḤARRAT AL-SHĀM DESERT, NORTH-EASTERN JORDAN

Nada Al-Rawabdeh,¹ Ali Al-Manaser²

¹Tourism Management Department, Faculty of Tourism and Archaeology, Jordan University, Amman, Jordan; ² Department of Cultural Resources Management and Museology, Queen Rania Faculty of Tourism and Heritage, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan (✉ aliy@hu.edu.jo)

ABSTRACT. *This paper focuses on recently discovered Safaitic inscriptions from the Jordanian Badia during the Badia Epigraphic Survey Project (BES), potentially referencing the historical figures King Aretas IV and his son King Malichus II. Drawing from the OCIANA database, which categorizes inscriptions mentioning or related to the Nabataeans or their rulers, these inscriptions have been meticulously studied and scrutinized.*

KEYWORDS. *Jordan, heritage, historical site, ANA inscriptions, Black Desert, Jordanian Badia, written heritage, epigraphy, Nabataean, early Islam, mosques.*

INTRODUCTION

Through the Badia Epigraphic Survey Project (BES), a wealth of unique inscriptions was captured, gathered during seven extensive surveys of the Jordanian Badia. Building on this success, the documentation project for Inscriptions in the Jordanian Badia was initiated in 2015 with the goal of discovering even more North Arabian inscriptions in both the Badia and surrounding regions. This project also aimed to undertake a thorough re-documentation of previously recorded inscriptions, while accurately recording the geographic coordinates of newly found inscriptions and writings. Furthermore, it sought to document any changes that may have taken place within the cairns bearing these inscriptions. According to recent surveys, a disturbing trend of looting and illegal excavation is plaguing cairns in various areas of Jordan.

This destructive behavior, driven by treasure hunters seeking precious metals and treasure, has led to the loss of valuable symbols and inscriptions found on these ancient rocks. Furthermore, the problem is exacerbated

by many local residents mistakenly believing that the markings indicate hidden treasures, leading to further destruction. Unfortunately, even documented cairns from the past century are not immune, as they have been desecrated for use in constructing graves for inhabitants of the Badia region. This act renders re-documenting these cairns nearly impossible, as relocating the inscriptions would be considered disrespectful to the sanctity of the tombs and the buried people inside them.

The BES team have done their best to document as many of these graves as possible. The BES project meticulously records all elements found at each site and cairn, encompassing precise geographic locations and any writings, regardless of their age. This includes thorough documentation of the cairns, essential for accurate mapping and identification of inscriptions.

Through this comprehensive approach, we are able to trace the distribution of names, tribes, and deities within the Badia region. Our team recognizes the significance of every inscription, as they provide valuable insights into the diverse culture of the Badia. This in-

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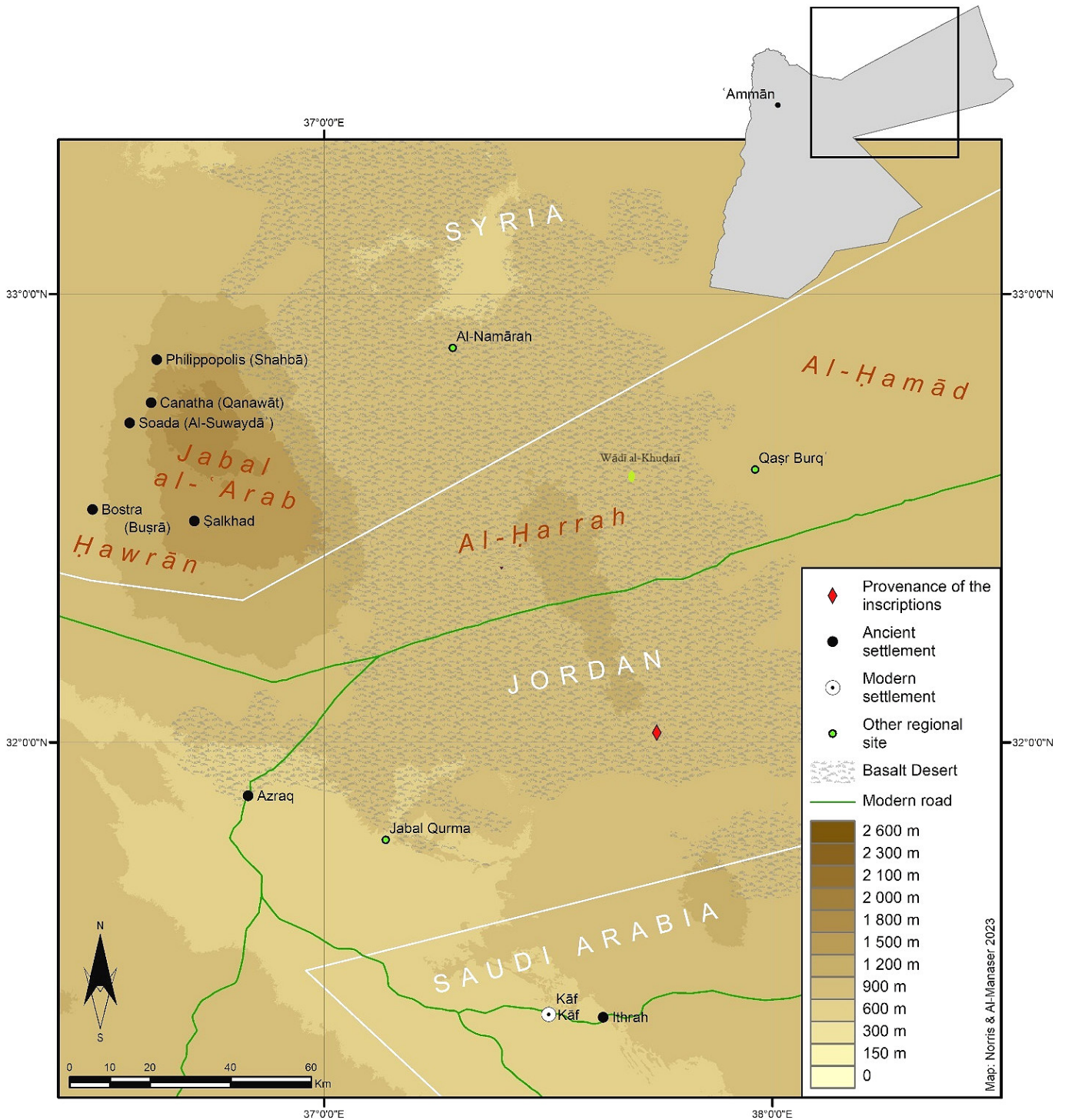


Figure 1. A map showing the sites on which the inscriptions were recorded.

cludes contemporary writing and rock drawings, highlighting the ongoing practice of these ancient traditions. People who reside in the region or those who come to see the cairns in the Badia consistently leave their marks, inscriptions and drawings.

The Harra has been the subject of extensive research on the inscriptions discovered in the region. These inscriptions encompass a wide range of languages, including Greek, Nabataean, Palmyrene, Thamudic, Safaitic,

early Arabic, and modern Arabic. Although the exact number of inscriptions remains unknown, the OCI-ANA database has records of over 45,000 inscriptions and has captured an impressive 450,000 images. Of these, about 20,000 to 30,000 are believed to be inscriptions. This means that around 70,000 inscriptions have been documented in total and now require thorough analysis to uncover the fascinating history of the pre-Islamic inhabitants of the region (Al-Manaser &



Figure 2. Stone bearing inscription no. 1.

MacDonald 2024). The overwhelming majority of inscriptions are in Safaitic and it is worth noting that the longer inscriptions are predominantly found in the cairns of the deep Ḥarrah region, far from the meeting point of Al-Hammad and The Harra. The inscriptions which are the subject of this study were discovered in Qa'a Abu al-Hussein, which is about 70 kilometres from the Ruweished area where there is a cairn bearing Safaitic inscriptions was previously recorded. What sets apart these two inscriptions is their unique discovery within the same cairn, near each other. This has sparked great interest in their study, particularly since they date back to a significant event: the death of the Nabataean King Aretas IV and the succession of his son, King Malichus II, to the throne.

THE INSCRIPTIONS¹

Inscription 1

Inscription 1 comes from site A. It is written in the so-called “fine script” variety of the Safaitic alphabet (see Della Puppa 2022: 83–105). The text is carved bous-

trophedon in three lines on the lower part of a stone bearing three other Safaitic inscriptions, also written in the “fine script.” The text starts from left-to-right in the upper line, continues from right-to-left on the middle line and ends from left-to-right again on the lower line.

Transcription

l zhr bn ḥṭṭ bn zhr d-ʿlgr w ḥll w w ʿy sʿnt myt ḥ{r}ṭṭ

Translation

By Zhr son of Ḥṭṭ son of Zhr of the lineage of Gr and he camped (here) and was on his guard the year Ḥ{r}ṭṭ died.

Commentary

The text is complete and only one letter is damaged. This is the second letter of the name in the dating formula, the upper part of which is affected by a scratch

¹These inscriptions were interpreted and discussed in collaboration with Jérôme Norris (Université de Lorraine).



Figure 3. Stone bearing inscription no. 2.

in the rock surface. However, enough of it is visible to make it certain that this is an *r*. The text follows the usual tripartite formulaic structure of the Safaitic inscriptions (Al-Jallad & Jaworska 2019: 5–6). It begins with the author’s genealogy introduced by *l* (*lām auctoris*), continues with a narrative section introduced by *w* about the author’s circumstances, and then ends with a concluding section, which in this case is not an invocation as is usual, but a dating formula which is both rare and valuable to ascertaining chronology.

In the first section, the author details his genealogy over three generations, after which he gives the name of his tribal group, the lineage of *Gr*. The two personal names that appear in the genealogy are both fairly common in Safaitic inscriptions. Among the Safaitic inscriptions from the OCIANA corpus, *Zhr* occurs in 31 times and *Hṭṭ* 18 times. It seems quite likely that these two names correspond to the Arab names *Zahr* and *Huṭayṭ* (CIK, II, 22, 613). Interestingly, the “Basalt Desert Rescue Survey” (BDRS) carried out by Geraldine King in 1989 had already uncovered two inscriptions left by this author in which he reiterates his belonging to the *lGr* but details this time his genealogy back to his great-

grandfather: *l zhr bn ḥṭṭ bn zhr bn t̄m d- lgr w syr s̄nt ws̄q̄ l̄ bd w̄ s̄ml fh lt s̄lm*, “By *Zhr* son of *Hṭṭ* son of *Zhr* son of *T̄m* of the lineage of *Gr* and he returned to a watering place the year the people of *bd* clashed with *s̄ml*, so, O *Lt*, let there be security” (KRS 2889); *l zhr bn ḥṭṭ bn zhr bn t̄m d- lgr w wgm l- qrb r̄gm mny fh lt s̄lm l-d s̄ r*, “By *Zhr* son of *Hṭṭ* son of *Zhr* son of *T̄m* of the lineage of *Gr* and he grieved for *qrb*, struck down by Fate, so, O *Lt*, may those who remain alive be secure” (KRS 3092). This new text brings the total number of known Safaitic inscriptions referring to the tribal group of *Gr* (**Gurr*?) to 22 (WH 1232, 2174; SIJ 246; C 2155). Unfortunately, not much can be said about it. It is not known in particular whether it corresponds to a tribe on its own or to a fraction of a larger group. Therefore, the relationship, if any, between the *lGr* and the tribe of *Df* (*Dayf*), to which the three authors of the other Safaitic inscriptions engraved on the same stone belong (*Znn l* son of *Mr*; *Hmy* son of *Znn l* the *Df*-ite; and *Mr* son of *Hmy*) remains indeterminable. With respect to the narrative section of the text, the first statement *w ḥll* “and he camped” is very common in Safaitic and does not merit any special attention (see



Figure 4. Stone bearing inscription no. 3.

Al-Jallad 2017: 121–123; Al-Jallad & Jaworska 2019: 85). The interpretation of the following statement, *w w̄y*, on the other hand, is uncertain. The verb *w̄y* occurs in a single other Safaitic inscription where it has the same meaning as the Classical Arabic G-stem *wāʾā*, “to pay attention to, to keep something in mind, to consider”: *w̄ȳ ḥ̄ l-rhlt-h ws̄¹q-h h-d̄¹ b*, “he was mindful of his ewe-lamb, which the wolf had seized” (C 4803; cf. Al-Jallad & Jaworska 2019: 138). In this case, however, the verb has no object, which means that it should have an intransitive sense. As a working hypothesis, we would therefore suggest to interpret it on the basis of the verb *wī¹ ī*, “be careful”, and its imperative *ʿiwī*, “watch out!”, as attested in varieties of colloquial Arabic (DRS 576). In Classical Arabic, this reflexive sense is found in the tD-stem of the root, *tawā¹ ī*, “to be one’s guard” (Steingass 1884: 1222).

Inscription 2

Transcription

l ḥrg bn ḥny bn ṣ̄ d bn s̄²rk bn ḡt w wgm l-ḥ-h ḥd trḥ w l-ṣ̄d w l-ḥd w ḥll d- l q̄s²m w s̄²ty b- ḥmlt s̄¹nt mlk mk

Translation

By Ḥrg son of ḥny son of Ṣ̄d son of S²rk son of Ḡt and he grieved for ḥd his brother who had perished and [he grieved] for Ṣ̄d and ḥd and he camped of the lineage of Qs²m and he spent the winter at the sandy tract covered with vegetation the year [which] MK became king.

Commentary

This particular inscription starts as the vast majority of Safaitic inscriptions tend to with the author beginning with the letter *l* (Al-Manaser 2008). Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that even though the names mentioned in this genealogy are well known from the Safaitic corpus, this exact combination had not been seen before this discovery. Overall, the inscription in question contains a significant narrative, a genealogy and a prayer as well. It appears that the writer of this inscription likely spent the winter season with the tribe of Qashm. In vivid detail, the writer describes the sandy landscape adorned with vegetation. Upon examining the precise location of the inscription’s discovery, it remarkably corresponds with the writer’s portrayal of a

rocky region situated within a sandy plain. Interestingly, the writer dates his inscription to the year of King Malichus II reign, a memorable time for those living in the desert.

The phrase *w ḥll d-ʿl q^s2m* makes its first appearance in Safaitic inscriptions in a unique manner, with the tribal marker *d-ʿl* placed after the verb *ḥll*. This deviates from the usual convention in which the tribe name directly follows the lineage sequence. Perhaps the inscription writer indeed settled with the Qashm tribe who inhabited the area, or perhaps he simply forgot to include his tribal affiliation immediately after the lineage sequence and then remembered to add it after inscribing the verb *ḥll*. The term *s²ty* denotes that the author of the inscription spent the winter season in this region. Safaitic inscriptions have many mentions of various seasons, including summer and spring. The topography of the location of the inscription is somewhat secluded with hills encircling it, providing shelter from winds. *Hmlt* refers to a sandy plain.

Inscription 3

Transcription

l ʿdr bn [[]]t bn ʿdr d-ʿl tm w ḥll s¹nt mlk mk w ʿbd r [[]]

Translation

By ʿdr son of [[]]t son of ʿdr of the lineage of Tm and he camped [here] the year MK became king and he took possession [of the cairn].

Commentary

The inscription contains a plethora of identifiable names, verbs, and tribal names, all of which can be found in the Safaitic corpus and other inscriptions that have been previously published.

It appears that the basalt stone of the inscription was dislodged and tumbled upon other rocks, resulting in the damage it now bears. Despite this, the majority of the inscription's letters remain legible, delicately etched in a square script. There are also petroglyphs: a drawing depicting two camels and a figure standing behind them, potentially a shepherd or the camels' owner. Below the writing, rests a contemporary tribal emblem. It is worth noting that the first and second letters of the second name are obliterated. Nevertheless, it could be speculated that the first letter may have been *ha*,

while the second could have been *m*. Regarding the final word in the inscription, it is highly probable to be *rgm*, indicated by the visible first letter. It can also be inferred that the two ambiguous letters are *g* and *m*, as it is customary to use the word *rgm* after the verb *take*. It is worth mentioning the omission of the definite article *h*.

HISTORICAL DISCUSSION

The inscriptions containing a reference to the Nabataean can be categorized into the following groups:

Category 1. Safaitic inscriptions that reference the Nabataean king.

Category 2 contains those inscriptions which reference known Nabataean persons.

Category 3 comprises the six known Safaitic inscriptions, which contain *h-nbtj*, which is the *nisba* form of *nbtj*.

Category 4 is the group of inscriptions that lists *nbtj* in a list among other nations, such as the Jews and the Romans.

Category 5 contains those inscriptions which reference *nbtj* in relation to events such as war, or when the author prays about the Nabataeans, either to help them or to cause them to flee. There are also inscriptions in which the author attacks the Nabataeans.

The Safaitic inscriptions that have been discovered so far contain a wealth of references to the Nabataeans, including their rulers and notable figures such as Syllaios and Demas (Hackl *et al.* 2003: 44, 63, 214). There is ongoing discussion about whether these references definitively point to Nabataean kings or famous individuals within the Safaitic community.

It is possible that names similar to those of Nabataean rulers could belong to well-known individuals or common members of the Safaitic tribes or the sons of local Bedouin tribes. However, the presence of the word “king” suggests a stronger likelihood that these names were those of Nabataean rulers. It is believed that the Safaitic people or Bedouins, inhabitants of the Jordanian desert, viewed the Nabataeans as a distinct and foreign people.

A recent discovery by the BES team found a Safaitic inscription in 2017, in which the author of the inscription seeks protection from the god “Dushara, the god of the Nabataeans”. This significant detail suggests that the writer perceives the Nabataeans as a group from outside the region, separate from the Bedouin tribes.

Table 1. Siglum and transliteration.

Siglum	Transliteration
KhNSJ 1	<i>l ḥnn bn ḏr l ḏ- l mrt w g{l}s¹ mn ḏ- dmt s¹nt mt mlk nbṭ</i>
ISB 57	<i>l ḥs¹yb bn mrh bn ḃṭn ḏ- l mḥrb w wgm ḥ- ḥt -h ḏb w qṣṣ s¹nt mlk rb ḥ</i>
ZeWA 1	<i>l whb ḥl bn ḥnn bn ḃd bn ḡt bn s²rk bn s¹krn ḏ- l qs²{m} w s²ty ḥ- dr {m-} rk s¹nt trq mk mlk nbṭ ṭḏn m ḥt qtl ḥl rm w s¹q tmr ḥ- ḥz { }m ḡd ḡd w ḥ lh w ḥ s²ḥqm ḡnyt w s¹lm m- ḏ ḥrṣ w ḡnmt ḥ- ḏ ḏ y ḥ- ḥṭṭ</i>
SNKA 1	<i>l ḡgrb bn ms¹k ḏ- l mrt w ḥll s¹nt mt ḥrtṭ ḥ- mlk</i>
NEH 9	<i>l ḥz bn ṣyd bn qdm ḏ- l kkb w y ḥmr b- ṣḥd w ḏṭ s¹nt mlk rb ḥ</i>
ZMMS 205	<i>l tm bn ṣrmt ḏ- l mrt w wld mḡzṭ {b-} {r}ḡl{t} {b-} nḡ{r}t s¹nt bḥr ṣwrṣ ḥ<>l- ml{k}t rb ḥ mlk {n}bṭ</i>
AbKRI 1	<i>l ḥs¹ybn bn mr(h) bn ḃtn ḏ- l mḥrb w qṣṣ s¹nt ṭḏ l rb ḥl f ḥ lt w ds²r s¹lm</i>
SHNS 5	<i>l ḡnm bn ḥlf bn ḥwd ḏ- l mn w wgm ḥ- ḥwrn w ḥ- rwḥ w ḥ- ns²l w ḥ- ws²yt w rh w rḡmn mny s¹nt myt ḥrtṭ w rṣ{n}</i>

Furthermore, it has been noted that in Safaitic inscriptions that the mention of the Nabataeans commonly terminates with the letter *yā* denoting attribution, as seen in the term *nbṭy*.

However, there is one Safaitic inscription where the mention of the Nabataeans is introduced by the definite article *ḥ*, typically used as the tribal identifier in Safaitic inscriptions. This marks the first instance of two Nabataean monarchs being mentioned in a single location. One of these rulers is believed to be King Aretas IV, whose reign came to an end in 40 CE, followed by his son King Malichus II. These inscriptions are among a very few contemporary attestations of King Malichus II, besides Josephus (Hackl *et al.* 2003: 46, 63–67).

According to Josephus, King Malichus II provided troops to support the Roman army in their conflict with the Jews. An additional confirmation of King Malichus II's existence comes from a Nabataean inscription discovered in the town of Salkhad in southern Syria, which refers to Malichus as the ruler of the Nabataeans and son of King Harith, who was described in the inscription as the Nabataean King “who loves his people” (Hackl *et al.* 2003: 187). It is noteworthy here to men-

tion that whenever this description (“who loves his people”) is associated with King Aretas in Safaitic inscriptions, it usually refers to King Aretas IV. Upon the passing of King Aretas IV in 40 CE, his son, King Malichus II, assumed the Nabataean kingdom's rulership for 31 years. King Malichus II was the son of King Aretas IV from his first wife, who bore him five sons. Malichus II married Shuqaila II, and they had three children together: a son named Rabbil and two daughters. Ambiguity has shrouded the identities of Kings Aretas and Malichus mentioned in the inscriptions of this study due to the recurrence of their names among Nabataean monarchs.

However, the discovery of two inscriptions at a single location, each commemorating distinct events—one mourning Aretas's death and the other honoring Malichus II coronation—establish a clear link between the name Aretas and King Malichus II, resolving the uncertainty surrounding their identification. Historical records indicate that King Malichus II, known as the King of the Nabataeans, was the son of King Aretas IV.

The two individuals who made the inscriptions may have been familiar with each other. The first inscrip-

Table 2. Siglum.

C	Safaitic inscriptions in <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars V. Inscriptiones Saracenicis Continens. Tomus 1. Inscriptiones Safaiticae</i> . Paris: Imprimerie nationale, (2 volumes), 1950-1951.
	Caskel 1966.
DRS	Cohen <i>et al.</i> , <i>Dictionnaire des Racines Sémitiques</i> , 1970-
ISB	Oxtoby, W.G. <i>Some Inscriptions of the Safaitic Bedouin</i> , 1968
KhNSJ	Al-Khraysheh, F.H. <i>New Safaitic Inscriptions from Jordan</i> , 1995
KRS	Safaitic inscriptions recorded by G.M.H. King during the Basalt Desert Rescue Survey and published on OCIANA.
LP	Littmann, E. <i>Safaitic Inscriptions</i> . Syria, 1943.
NEH	Al-Salameen, Z., Shdeifat, Y. & Harahsheh, R. Nabataean echoes in al-Ḥarrah: New evidence in light of recent field work. 2018
OCIANA	Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia. http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/index.php
RVP	Ryckmans, G. <i>Inscriptions safaitiques de Transjordanie</i> , 1941
SIJ	Safaitic inscriptions in Winnett 1957.
SNKA	Al-Salameen, Z. A new Ancient North Arabian inscription with a reference to the Nabataean king Aretas, 2011
Steingass	Steingass 1884.
WH	Safaitic inscriptions in Winnett & Harding 1978.
ZeWA	Zeinaddin, H. <i>Al-‘alāqāt al-ṣafā’ iyyat al-nabaṭiyyah min ḥilāl al-kitābāt</i> , 2002
ZMMS	Previously unpublished inscriptions recorded by Al-Zu‘bī, M. & Al-Ma‘ānī, S.A. on their Mrabb aš-Šarafā’ and Wādī Suway‘id Survey in north-eastern Jordan in 2015

tion, possibly by someone who was older and more admiring of King Aretas IV, commemorates his death as a meaningful event.

The second inscription, perhaps made by someone with more optimistic hopes for the future, marks the accession of King Malichus II, considering Aretas IV’s lengthy reign of about five decades. Two inscriptions have been found, one in Syria and one in Jordan, that clearly mention King Malichus and describe him as the King of Nabataeans. This supports that inscription number 1 of this study clearly refers to King Malichus II, the son of Aretas IV, and thus can be dated to the year 40 CE.

The list of Table 1 includes Safaitic inscriptions that explicitly mention Nabataean kings (Hackl *et al.* 2003: 44–46, 252). So far, 100 Safaitic inscriptions bearing reference to the Nabataeans such as containing the term “Nabataean” or referring to prominent Nabataean fig-

ures or kings have been discovered. However, the list of Table 1 includes Safaitic inscriptions that explicitly mention Nabataean kings (See OCIANA, *nbt*).

CONCLUSION

The inscriptions discovered in the Jordanian Badia show the importance of Nabataean rulers and their connection to the Badia. The inhabitants of the region were in contact with the neighboring regions in the first centuries CE, especially with cities such as Damascus and Ḥawrān. These inscriptions reveal a lot about the lives of these inhabitants and knowledge about the life of the tribes that inhabited the Ḥarrah has become better through the discovery of more inscriptions that contain many information about the different aspects of their lives. Understanding and translating the inscrip-

tions at the site give a better interpretation of the true meaning of the actions or words contained in the inscriptions. Many of the translations of inscriptions are being reconsidered because more inscriptions have been discovered and translated based on their general meaning and not based on their literal meaning.

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