

New Sabaean Inscription on Miḥrāb and its Role in the Healing of Diseases

Mohammed A. Atbuosh

International Black Sea University, Faculty of Social
Sciences/m@atbuosh.com

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Abstract: Publication of a new Sabaean inscription, related to the 'Miḥrāb' part in ancient South Arabian temples, and its role in the healing of diseases. This may provide an example of 'Therapeutic Incubation' i.e., sleeping in the temple to receive healing from the god, with 'Athtar providing healing for patients in a particular place called the mḥrbt (Miḥrāba). The new inscription was recognized online after its photos had been shared, resulting from illicit excavation during the war in Yemen, among other inscriptions, said to be sold to an unknown merchant..

Keywords: Sabaean Inscription, Ancient South Arabia, Incubation, Dream, 'Athtar.

الملخص

نقش سبئي جديد عن المحراب ودوره في شفاء الأمراض

محمد علي عطبوش

m@atbuosh.com

يُعنى البحث بنشر نقش سبئي جديد عن الجزء المسمى "محراب" في معابد جنوب الجزيرة العربية القديمة، ودوره في شفاء الأمراض. ويبدو ذلك مثلاً على ممارسة "الحالومة الشفائية"، والمقصود بها طقس النوم في المعبد لتلقي الاستشفاء من الإله، ممثلاً بالإله عثر الذي يظهر مانحاً الشفاء للمرضى في موضع محدد يسمى "م ح ر ب ت" (محرابة). وقد عُثِر على صورة هذا النقش على شبكة الإنترنت، إذ تمت مشاركة عدة صور له بعد نبش عشوائي غير مشروع أثناء الحرب في اليمن، إلى جانب نقوش أخرى قيل إنها بيعت لتاجر مجهول.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نقش سبئي، جنوب الجزيرة العربية القديمة، الأمراض، طقس الحالومة.

Introduction

In the context of the destructive war in Yemen since 2014, Yemeni heritage is largely exposed to destruction and unfortunate loss. Until 2019, General Organization of Antiquities and Museums recorded about 66 museums, monuments, archaeological sites, and about 35 religious monuments that have been destroyed or exploded, in addition to increasing illicit excavation and smuggling of artifacts (al-Siyani, 2009, 259). As a result of these acts, photos of a newly discovered stone inscription, have been shared on an online social-media platform (Facebook) on 1st November 2020. In addition to new two bronze inscriptions, a fragmentally dedicatory plates, shared online by the same person, on 28th November 2020, one of which or each one consists of the formula "Sin dū-'Alīm" identical to another dedicatory inscriptions from Dhu-Alīm temple in Shabwah. All three Inscriptions said to be from *Jabal 'Iyāl Yazīd* district in 'Amrān governorate, in western central Yemen, which is doubtful, as smugglers tend to be obscure about where they found the artifacts. No further information or photos has yet become available about these inscriptions, as they were sold⁽¹⁾.

However, the three available photographs of the stone inscription (Figs: 1- 3) are relatively clear and sufficient, for a preliminary study, which is provided here. Two of the photographs (Figs: 1 - 2) were shot after water had been poured on the inscription.

In general, this is a dedicatory text consisting of 17 lines engraved on a stone, approximately 75×50 cm in size, compared to the floor tiles shown below it, which are usually 50×50 cm. It belongs to an individual called

(1) Personal communication with the individual who shared the photos, via WhatsApp, on 15th May 2021.

Wahb'īl, who is asking the deity 'Aṭtar for healing from a disease. It has been possible to restore some of the glyphs to reveal well-attested formulas known from other inscriptions; however, this has not been possible for the majority of glyphs.

Transcription

1. [Whb'īl](d)[... ...]
2. [bn hl]z hl*z*-hw w-m('s(rt)[... ...]
3. [... ...](b)t-hw w-(s' l)-hw 'tt[r]
4. [mr]'-hw s(lm)[m] w-twrw w-k[... ...]
5. [...] qṭrm w-(n d)ḥm my(š)[.]šr b
6. w- 'tr-šrqn f-r'k-šry '(b)d—
7. [-hw W]hb'īl bn kl mr d mr d (s)
8. [...]ftm w-tryd b-mḥrbt(n) [... ...]
9. [...]f)n w- 'rb 't mr(d) qwmw w-
10. [...]w l- 'tr-šrqn ḥmdm (b)[- d t h 'n-h]—
11. w w-nšb-hw bn hw(t) [mr d n]
12. ['t]tr-šrqn f-l-z 'n s' d[-h]—
13. (mw) šdqm 'dy ('rd-)hmw
14. [w-ḥmr-h]mw 'wldm hn 'm w-h[... ...]
15. [... ...]'(-h)mw w-r t d w 'tt[ršrqn]
16. [... ...](-h)mw bn š sy-šn['m]
17. [... ...]šrn

Translation

1. [Wahb'īl] dhū- ...
2. [sickness of which] he suffered and danger...
3. his (temple), and 'Aṭtar his [lord]

4. asked him a statue and a bull and...
5. ... burnt offering and libation ((or: applied incense and took a bath))
... *my(š)[.]šr?*
6. and 'Aṭtar-Sharqān gave a favourable decision to protect his servant
7. *Wahb*īl from every suffering of disease ...
8. ... and went (for healing) in the *Miḥrāba* ...
9. ... 'thousand?' and four patients in total, and
10. ... for 'Aṭtar-Sharqān, [in praise because he (delivered him)]
11. and raised him up (healthy) from these (diseases).
12. May 'Aṭtar-Sharqān continue to grant to them
13. true prosperity in their land,
14. [and grant them] healthy children, and ...
15. their... and they committed to 'Aṭtar[-Sharqān]
16. their ... from malice of any enemy
17. ... (and) the evil ...

Commentary

Line 1:

- First line is completely destroyed, except for the glyph '𐩠'. Usually, dedicatory texts begin with the genealogy of the authors. Here we are may restore the proper name of the author (*Wahb* ī) from line 7 (see below).

Line 2:

- [*bn ḥl*]z ḥl*z*-hw: This is a hypothetical restoration and correction, based on other inscription mention 'bn ḥlz ḥlz' (CIH 407/9; Ja 613/9; Ja 633/5; cf. Sa'īd 2002, 18-21), meaning

‘disease of which he suffered’. *z* in *hl*z*-hw* is clearly *r*, probably a scriptive mistake.

- *mʿšrt*: from the root ʿŠR has the meaning ‘peril, danger’ in the Sabaic Dictionary (SD: 21), cf. Arabic *ʿaṣarahū al-ʿalam* (squeezed in pain), and Yemeni *ʿaṣar* ‘to suffer from lumbago’ (Piamenta: 329)

Line 3:

- [... ...](*b*)*t-hw*: his temple. *bt* from the root BYT ‘house; village, estate; temple, etc.’ (SD: 34), although the stone is broken right before the *lemma*, which makes it uncertain.
- *w-(sʿl)-hw*: *sʿl* ‘ask, request, demand’ (SD: 121), and ‘-hw’ referring to ‘Athtar.
- *ʿt[r]*: ‘Athtar, the supreme god in ancient south Arabia.

Line 4:

- [*mr*]²*hw*: *mr*’ meaning (lord) is partly restored here according to the context.
- *š(lm)[m] w-ḥwrm w-k[l]*: a statue and a bull and every...

Line 5:

- *qḥrm w-(nḍ)ḥm*: the term *qḥrm* (from QḤR) should have a meaning associated to *mqḥrt* (incense-altar) (SD: 109). However, *qḥrm* being followed with *nḍḥm* (from NḌḤ), cf. *mnḍḥ* (water distributor), make it highly possible to read as a religious practice been performed: either burnt-incense and libation, or that the patient applied incense and purifying baths.

- *my(š)[.]šr*: ? (Not clear in the available photos). According to DASI, ‘*myš...*’ is hitherto unattested in the corpus of South Arabian inscriptions, thus it is preferable to avoid any uncertain suggestion for now.

Line 6:

- *w-ṭr-šrqn*: and ‘Athtar Sharqān.
- *f-r’k-šry*: The phrase *f-r’k-* is well attested in the inscriptions in the meaning of ‘gave a favorable decision to’; *šry* meaning ‘protect’ (SD: 145). Note the attestation of this exact expression in a similar context (dealing with ḤRB) in Nāmī NAG 12/ 20-21.
- *(b)d-hw*: his servant.

Line 7:

- *Whb l*: A personal theophoric name: ‘Wahb’l’ (Tairan, 1992, 233).
- *bn kl*: from every.
- *mrḏ mrḏ*: suffering of disease. This repeating of ‘*mrḏ*’ occurred in several inscription about the diseases⁽¹⁾.

Line 8:

- *w-tryd*: It is remarkable that ‘*tryd*’ occurred in a context of epidemic in CIH 541/92 meaning ‘diminish, fall off, subside’ of the diseases. However, the meaning should be slightly different here, as the context is about the ‘*tryd*’ of the person himself, not the diseases. A possible interpretation can be established according to the following term ‘*b-mḥrbtn*’.

(1) see for instance: CIH 530/5; CIH 336/9; Ja 585/11.

- *b-mḥrbt(n)*: in-the-Miḥrāba (feminine form) derived from the root ḤRB, cf. ‘*mḥrbn*’ in Ir 12/5, ‘*mḥrb-hmw*’ in Ir 71/4, ‘*[m]ḥrb-hw*’ in RES 4108/3, ‘*mḥrbn*’ in RES 3122/3 (Robin, 1991, 153), and even ‘*ḍ-mḥrb*’ (Robin, 1991, 155), among its meanings: ‘incubation’, a practice of sleeping in the temple to receive oracular decision, though not ‘therapeutic incubation’. However, both concepts come close, therefore, ‘*w-tryd b-mḥrbtn*’ could mean ‘and went (for healing) in the *Miḥrāba*’ that is a temple part where a patient receives a divine healing. This can be supported by a recently interpreted minuscule inscription (L 044/6), where the association of the ‘*mḥrb*’ with the verb ‘*ystṭbn*’ (receive healing or medicine) becomes evident. It goes: *ḍt t ṛḥn ḍt t ṛwn mḥrb hgrn l-ḍt ystṭbn b-śn-k b-tsnn h-sy-k* “that you prepare what you send to the city's *miḥrāb*, so that he can heal his teeth with the dental medicine that you bring” (Faq‘as, 2022, 351, 399, 441); Cf. *mrḍn śnnhw* “the disease of his teeth” (Maraqten 2014, 314-315).

Line 9:

- *[... ...](f)n w-ṛb ṯ mr(ḍ) qwmm*: ‘thousand?’ and four patients in total. ‘*ṛ-*’ in *ṯfn* is hypothetical, and ‘*f*’ is not certain. although it would be quite doubtful to count in this precise manner.
- *mr(ḍ)*: patients. The ‘*ḍ*’ is not certain, ‘*b*’ is also possible.
- *qwmm*: total amount. See the beginning of YM 12 025 ‘*qwm-hw sb ṯ ṣr*’ (Total amount of seventeen), *qwm-hw* as in Arabic ‘*quāmuhu*’ (Maraqten, 2014, 361-362).

Line 10:

- *w l-ʿttr-šrqn*: and for ‘Aṭṭar-Sharqān.
- *ḥmdm*: praise, thank (SD: 68).
- *b-ḍt ...-hw*: can be restored ‘*b-ḍt h ḥn-hw*’ meaning ‘because he delivered him’ (SD: 23), as in ‘*ḥmdm b-ḍt h ḥn*’ in Ja 613/6-7, and ‘*ḥmdm b-ḍt h ḥn*’ in CIH 407/7.

Line 11:

- *w-nšb-hw*: *naṣab* in classical Arabic is ‘fatigue, tiredness’ (Lane, 2799); still, the context here shows the person grateful (*ḥmdm*) for being *h ḥn* and *nšb*; which excludes the ‘fatigue’. The root NṢB in the Sabaic Dictionary has a meaning of ‘set up’ (SD: 99), this allows a comparison of the root NṢB with QWM, which is used in the sense of ‘raising up healthy’ as in classical Arabic ‘*intaṣab salīm min al-kusāḥ*’ (al-Nabhānī, 1911, 327) (raised up healthy after rickets), and ‘*wa-qām salīm lā maraḍ bih*’ (Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, 2013, II,322) (and raised up healthy with no sickness).
- *bn hw(t) [mrḥn]*: from those, referring to the diseases. cf. ‘*bn hwt mrḥn*’ in BynM 1/9 and ‘*hwt mrḥn*’ in CIH 405/9 and ‘*b-hwt mrḥn*’ in Ja 670/14.

Line 12:

- [*ʿttr-šrqn f-l-z ḥn*]: May ‘Aṭṭar-Sharqān continue to.
- *s ḍ[-h]—(mw)*: grant to them (SD: 121, 122).

Line 13:

- *šdqm ʿdy (ʿrd-)hmw*: This phrase is attested in several inscriptions, meaning ‘true prosperity/fine crops in their land’, cf. ‘*šdqm ʿdy ʿrd-hmw*’ in the inscription Ir 36/B2.

Line 14:

- [*w-ḥmr-h*]mw *ʾwldm hn ʾm*: This phrase is also a very well-known formula, that we can restore almost the whole word *w-ḥmr-hmw* meaning ‘and grant them’.
- *ʾwldm hn ʾm*: meaning ‘healthy children’.

Line 15:

- *w-rṯdw ʿt[ršrqn]*: and they committed to ‘Aṭṭar-Sharqān. cf. ‘*rṯd ʿtr*’ in MAFRAY-ad-Durayb 7, and ‘*rṯd ʾmqh*’ in RES 4087.

Line 16-17:

- *bn ššy-šn[ʾm] [... ...]šrn*: a well-known expression at the end of dedicatory inscriptions, meaning: from malice of any enemy (and) the evil. Except for ‘...šrn’ which occurred in the minuscule inscriptions (L 019/6; L 008/6) as “šrr” (Faq‘as 2022, 367), probably a cognate with the Arabic *Sharr*: evil.

Discussion

Some dedications that were offered for protection against sickness (*mrḏ*) were fulfilled after the direct order (*wqh*) of the deity. This is the case in inscriptions such as: Haram 32; Gr 137; Ja 633; Ja 583 + Ja 807. Orders were received ‘in a dream by the worshipper or through priestly

intervention' (Maraqten, 2015, 112); in fact, there are some texts that explicitly state this, e.g., Ja 567.

The dedicator, in this new inscription under study, 'Wahb'īl' provided a bull (probably as a sacrificed animal), and a statue (as a gift) that his lord asked him (*s l-hw*) to give. Line 4 also reads *w-k[l]* ... (and...), but it is badly damaged here.

Line 5 reads '*qṭrm w-nḍḥm*', two words that are associated with incense and water. It is possible to interpret them as 'burnt incense and libation', but 'applied incense and took a bath' is also compatible with the Islamic tradition about pre-islamic south Arabia.

We have two poetic verses read: "*wa-tandā misk-an maḥāribuhā*" (and its *miḥrāb*-s are dewy with Musk), and "*ṣan ā' u wa-al-misk-u fī maḥāribihā*" (Sana'a and the Musk in its *miḥrāb*-s) (Landberg, 1920, 395); Furthermore, al-Aṣma'ī (d. 828 AD) said: "I entered one of the *miḥrāb*-s of Ḥimyar and the scent of musk blew in my face" (Khoury, 1998, 6); It seems that aromatics in Yemen were associated with *miḥrāb* on a regular basis.

The following word in the inscription *my(š)[.]ṣr* seems well preserved, but unfortunately, it is not clear in the available photos, which might determine the meaning.

After that, in lines 6–7, his lord ('Aṭṭar Sharqān) gave a favourable decision to protect him from every suffering of disease. The inscription then reads: 'and *tryd* in the *mḥrb*'. (Maraqten, 2015, 112) assumed that "the place where the ḤRB-ritual was performed should be called *mḥrb*", which has been confirmed.

The root ḤRB has been discussed by several scholars. Ryckmans (1968) was the first who discussed the relation between ḤRB-ritual and obtaining divination by Oneiromancy. Later, Müller (1986, 150) indicated a case of ‘Traum erwähnt wird, die während einer Inkubation geschaut wurde’ referring to Ja 567, and Biella (1982, 187) interpreted *tḥrbn* and *tḥrbt* in RES 4632 as ‘vision obtained by incubation in the miḥrāb’⁽¹⁾.

The hypothesis of therapeutic incubation in South Arabia may find confirmation in a number of inscriptions, such as Ja 567, where an individual saw *ḥlm* (dream) during his *snt* (sleep) when he was *ḥlz* (sick) and subsequently dedicated three statues in bronze; Ja 702, where an individual was punished by a malady after committing an offense, and so he asked for *ḥwlm* (dream); and Ja 721, where a woman asked the god for *wldm* (a child) in the *ṣdġ* (incubation) (Stein, 2006, 298-299).

In his article on “*Miḥrāb*”, Serjeant (1959, 443) included an extensive commentary of al-Ghūl on inscriptions RES 4632 and RES 3512B, where “*tḥrbt* and *tḥrb* are attested. al-Ghūl wrote:

the *tḥrbt* refers to the kiosk itself. The word would then bear the sense of 'chamber' or 'kiosk', possibly for observation (...) it seems to have been offered as an act of thanksgiving for the building of a *tḥrb*.

Later, al-Ghūl synonymised between *mdqnt* and *mḥrb*, supporting his opinion with Serjeant’s material. Al-Ghūl (1962, 333-334) went even

(1) For more discussions about the root see: (Serjeant, 1959, 442-443; Robin, 1991, 152-155; Stein, 2006; Maraqtan, 2015, 109, 112; ‘Aṭbūš, 2021), with a modern Yemeni parallel of incubation practice called *al-Tasfil* (literally ‘taking down’), where the healer (usual a woman) claims to possess demons who reveal to her the patient’s condition, as well as the appropriate treatment for that condition. That revelation comes to her healer through a coma into which she falls, in the underground store of a house (*safal*), to communicate with demons.

further, comparing *mḍqnt/mḥrb* with the Arabic *ṣuffah*, which is a part of the early Prophetic Mosque. However, on 2015, Maraqtan (2015, 109) suggested to consider *mḍqnt* as “front building, buttress of a structure, entrance-chamber”.

Moreover, the scene in CIH 419 (where a human figure ‘touches’ a reclining woman on a couch) that is inscribed with a curse invoking ‘Athtar resembles Asklepios scenes in which patients were healed in the *abatōn*, i.e., a sleeping chamber where patients seek a holistic healing in Epidauros, a temple that was attended as a healing sanctuary from approximately the sixth century BC to the third century AD. This perception may provide us with another example of the anthropomorphic manifestations of the South Arabian divinities and their roles.

Etymology of *mḥrb/mḥrbt*

Rhodokanakis (1911, 71-80) suggested that the Arabic *miḥrāb* is related to *ḥarbah* (spear)⁽¹⁾ in the sense of a place of pillars (as an analogy to the Prophet’s actions using a *ḥarbah* (a spear) as a *miḥrāb* for the prayer,) and as a comparison with the Sabaic root NṢB. Likewise, it can be assumed that a specific place in the ancient South Arabian temples was called *mḥrb* because it has many ‘*ḥarbah*’ (spear) as pillars. Serjeant supported this with the fact that the word *sahm* (arrow) is still used to mean ‘a column’ in Ḥaḍramawt (Serjeant 1959, 451; cf. Piamenta, 236; Lane, 1455)⁽²⁾.

(1) Cf. Sabaic *ḥrbm* (spears) in: MAFRAY-al-Mi’sāl 2: 12.

(2) We can also support that idea with the verse “*maḥārīb-u baynahā al-‘amad-u*” (maḥārīb among which are the pillars) (al-Zabidi, 1965, XIX: 167).

One may wonder whether the same etymological approach can be applied to the Arabic *'sahm'* (shot arrows, drew lots)⁽¹⁾ as a divination practice (Lane, 1454), since Ibn Manzur mentioned the pre-Islamic practice of *al-istihām* (drew lots), derived from the root SHM.

This could also be the case with the Arabic *'qidḥ'* (an arrow before it has been furnished with feathers and a head, used in the game called *'al-maysir'* - sortilege) (Lane, 2493); and the Arabic *'zalam'* (an arrow without a head and feathers: which was applied to those divining arrows ... Some say that the *'azlām* are the arrows of the game called *al-maysir*) (Lane, 1247).

Both roots ḤRB and SHM have the meanings of: 'weapon', 'beam' and a divination practice (cf. Qur'an, 37:141); and both QDḤ and ZLM have the meanings of: 'arrow' and 'divination practice' (*al-maysir*), which is mentioned in the Qur'an alongside *al-'anṣāb* and *al-'azlām*:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنَّا الْحَمْرُ وَالْمَيْسِرُ وَالْأَنْصَابُ وَالْأَزْلَامُ رِجْسٌ مِّنْ عَمَلِ الشَّيْطَانِ

فَاجْتَنِبُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴾ [Qur'an 5:90.]

However, Robin (1991, 155) suggested more simple explanation, comparing *mḥrb* with *mḥrm* (temple); a sound change *m* to *b* which is found in the South Semitic languages.⁽²⁾

In conclusion, I would like to point out the importance of following social media groups in Yemen, especially Facebook, as many individuals happen to share photos or valuable information about new artifacts, before it finds its way to international auctions, or simply disappear.

(1) Ibn Duraid said: that the plural of *sahm*, in the sense of portion, is *suhmān*, while the plural of archer's *sahm* is only *sihām*. (1987, II: 862)

(2) I am grateful to Dr. Yusuf Gürsey for this addition.

Photos:

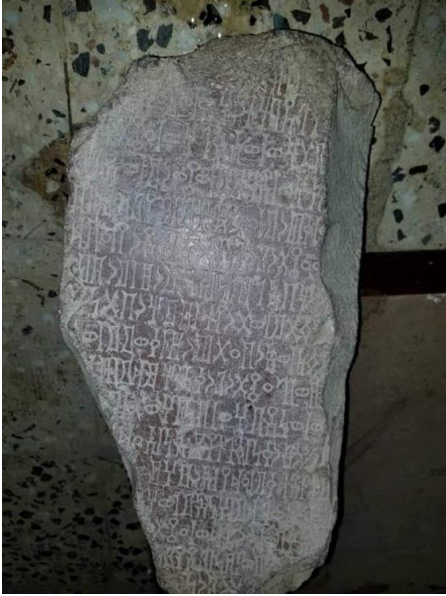


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Abbreviations and symbols

- CIH: = Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum, Inscriptioes Himyariticas et sabaeas continens. Paris: 1889-1932.
- DASI — Digital Archive for the Study of pre-Islamic Arabian Inscriptions DASI <http://dasi.cnr.it> .
- Ir: al-Iryānī, M. (1990).
- MAFRAY-ad-Durayb: Robin, C. J. & Ryckmans, J. (1980).
- Nāmī NAG: Inscription edited by nāmī, khalīl yaḥyā (1960).
- RES: Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique V–VIII. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1928-68.
- SD: Beeston A.F.L., Ghūl M.A., Müller W.W., Ryckmans J. (1982). *Sabaic Dictionary*. Louvain-la-Neuve–Beirut: Edition Peeters and Librairie du Liban.
- () Uncertain or partial reading.
- (()) Variant (alternative reading or interpretation).
- [] Supplied text (restored lacuna).
- [], [..], [...] Letter Gap, (unrestored lacuna).
- [... ...] Undefined gap, (unrestored lacuna).
- * * Correction (because of a mistake in the source).
- — Broken word.

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