

Remarks on a Palmyrene Aramaic inscription (‘National Museum’, Damascus, C954)*

JUAN PEDRO MONFERRER-SALA
Universidad de Córdoba

A relief dated in the 2nd century AD with a Palmyrene inscription¹ from Dura-Europos, which is currently on exhibition at the ‘National Museum of Damascus’², is the subject of a debate from the beginning of the thirties in the last century³ to the present day⁴. Although certain questions related to the identification of some words still remain to be answered, our aim in the present note is to offer some comments to the terms in the inscription.

* This study belongs to the Research Project HUM2007-64961: “Estudio y edición de manuscritos bíblicos y patristicos griego-árabes y latinos”, subsidized by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Culture. I would like to thank professors Simon Hopkins and Ángel Urbán for their useful and valuable suggestions.

¹ On the Palmyrene language see Jean CANTINEAU, *Grammaire du palmyrénien épigraphique*, Cairo: Imprimerie de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1935 (reed. 1987).

² See, for instance *Sūriyah*, Damascus: Wizārat al-Siyāḥah fī l-Ġumhūriyyah al-‘Arabiyyah al-Sūriyyah, 1987, p. 24.

³ Robert DU MESNIL DU BUISSON, *Rapport sur la sixième campagne de fouilles à Doura-Europos*, «Comptes rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles Lettres» 193-203, Paris, 1933, p. 200.

⁴ Roberto BERTOLINO, *Corpus des inscriptions sémitiques de Doura-Europos*, «Supplemento agli Annali. Sez. Orientale», Napoli: Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, 2004, pp. 12-14.

The relief, which is 40-46 cm high and 40 cm wide, with a measure of the scripts that fluctuates between 2.5 and 3 cm, depicts a scene with two characters, one of them riding a horse⁵:



The motif in the relief, as can be seen on other artistic features in Nabatene, Palmyra and Dura-Europos, and to a lesser degree in Ḥatra, seems to be the result of the religious *Koiné* that was based on Semitic, Egyptian, Iranian and Greek elements, which mixed with each other. Thus, in Dura-Europos, for instance, the Greek colonists brought with them their Greek gods, who live together with those of the Semitic natives. This coexistence of the several deities creates a development and transformation of the religious and artistic situation by mixing the different elements under a gradually hellenization of the oriental towns like Dura-Europos and Palmyra⁶.

The transliteration and transcription of the two lines of the inscription, together with its translation run as follow:

⁵ For a description of the relief, see M. I. ROSTOVTZEFF (ed.), *The excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary reports. Sixth season, 1932-1933*, New Haven, 1934, pp. 228-238, pl. XXX.1 y pp. 238-240.

⁶ See M. ROSTOVTZEEF, *Dura-Europos and its Art*, Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1938, p. 66.

1st line: ܕܟܪܢ ܩܒܠܘܢ ܥܒ ܩܒܘܢ ↔ *dkrn ṭb l-šrw w-šd*

2nd line: ܕܢܝܫܡ ܡܬܐ ܕܒܢܝܫܡ ܡܬ ↔ *gny' 'bd bnyšm mt'*

«[In] good memory of 'Ašarū and Šašad, / the gods. Ben-Yišam Mata' did it»

A short linguistic remarks follow below with the purpose of identifying some discussed words, vgr. the proper names *šrw*, *š'd*, *bnyšm* and the plural noun *gny'*, and of witnessing the use of the other words that appear in texts and inscriptions from the Semitic linguistic area as well.

—1ST LINE—

- dkrn* → 'remember, mention': noun singular. The plural form *dkyryn* is documented in Nabatean inscriptions in a similar context⁷. The root *dkr* in Sabaeen, Arabic, and Aramaic dialects, as is well known, squares with root *zkr* in Akkadian, Phoenician, Hebrew, ancient Aramaic, Mandaean, and Ethiopic.
- ṭb* → 'pleasant, good': adjective singular. The root *ṭwb* belongs to the 'common Semitic' and sometimes appears under the secondary forms *y'b* and *ṭ'b*. For the several nominal forms in Aramaic and Arabic see the Akkadian etymon *ṭābu(m)*. Cf. also the formula *mdkwr* [...] *bṭb* in a Nabataean graffiti from Sinai⁸.
- l* → 'to, for': preposition, with equivalents in the Semitic area.
- '*šrw* → ' 'Ašrū': proper noun. Although du Mesnil proposed the Hebrew 'Āšēr (i.e. 'happy one'⁹, a meaning that is perhaps

⁷ Jean CANTINEAU, *Le nabatéen*. 2 vols., Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 2^e1978 (= Paris, 1930-32), II, p. 37, 1st line, p. 47 (graffiti n. 1), cf. p. 48; *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum II: Inscriptiones aramaicas continens. Sectio secunda: Inscriptiones nabataeae*, Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1902-1907, II, n° 1325.

⁸ Jean CANTINEAU, *Le nabatéen*, II, p. 48.

⁹ Cf. the neo-punic 'šr lb 'hearts' happiness', in H. DONNER - W. RÖLLIG, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, mit einem Beitrag von O. Rössler, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1962-64, I, p. 27 (145: 11), translation and comments in II, p. 141, and

related to the Ugaritic *ʿtr*¹⁰; cf. the Arabic name *ʿAṭīr* as a possible equivalent name of the previous Palmyrene proper noun, this form is also documented in Nabatean sources like *ʿAšārū*, with a cognate form in the Arabic *ʿašīr*. On the other hand, if this consonantal *ductus* should be read as *ʿšdw*, we have the name *ʿĀšadū* (transliterated in Greek like *Asádou*), which is also documented in Nabatean inscriptions¹¹, being a cognate of the Arabic *ʿAsad*, ‘lion’¹².

- w* → ‘and’: preposition, with equivalents in the Semitic area.
- šʿd* → ‘Šaʿad’: proper noun. This name is read in Nabataean inscriptions like *Šaʿadū*¹³, a cognate of the Arabic *Saʿd*, i.e. ‘good luck’, which is also documented in the Sabaeen *S¹ʿd*.¹⁴ The name is transliterated into Greek as *Soad*(–*os*, –*ou*)¹⁵, but also like *Sad* in theophoric compound names as *Sadala(s)*, *Sadaalo(s)*, *Sadalo(s)*, *Sadalla(s)*, and *Sadallo(s)*¹⁶, obviously related to Nabatean *šʿdʿlhy* and *šʿdlh*¹⁷, and Safaitic *šʿdlh* as well¹⁸.

Charles-F. JEAN - Jacob HOFTIJZER, *Dictionnaire des inscriptions sémitiques de l'ouest*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965, pp. 112-113.

¹⁰ Cf. Cyrus H. GORDON, *Ugaritic Textbook. Glossary, indices*, «Analecta Orientalia» 38, Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1967 (reeditio Photomechanica), p. 38b.

¹¹ David F. GRAF, “Qurā ‘Arabiyya and Provincia Arabia”, in D.F. GRAF, *Rome and the Arabian Frontier: from the Nabataeans to the Saracens*, «Variorum Collected Studies» 594, Ashgate, Hampshire, 1997, p. 201 (n. 21 = JS 246), cf. pl. 12 in p. 211.

¹² Stanley A. COOK, *A glossary of the Aramaic inscriptions*, Cambridge: Oxford University Press 1898 (reed. Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2004), p. 26. Cf. Jean CANTINEAU, *Le nabatéen*, II, p. 68a.

¹³ Stanley A. COOK, *A glossary of the Aramaic inscriptions*, p. 116; David F. GRAF, “Rome and the Saracens: Reassessing the Nomadic Menace”, in D.F. GRAF, *Rome and the Arabian Frontier...*, p. 345; Jean CANTINEAU, *Le nabatéen*, II, p. 152b.

¹⁴ A. JAMME, *Sabaeen and Hasaeen Inscriptions from Saudi Arabia*, «Studi Semitici» 23, Roma: Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, 1966, p. 29 (1018 a).

¹⁵ Stanley A. COOK, *A glossary of the Aramaic inscriptions*, p. 116.

¹⁶ See Henry I. MACADAM, “A New Greek Inscription from Northern Jordan”, *Graeco-Arabica V* (1993), p. 298.

¹⁷ David F. GRAF, “The Nabataean Army and the *Cohortes Ulpiae Petraeorum*”, in D.F. GRAF, *Rome and the Arabian Frontier...*, p. 286, cf. fig. 3 in p. 287.

¹⁸ G.L. HARDING, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Names and Inscriptions*, «Near and Middle East Series» 8 (Toronto: University of Toronto), p. 319.

('NATIONAL MUSEUM', DAMASCUS, C954)

—2ND LINE—

gny' → 'gods': noun, masculine plural. Cf. the Arabic collective *ġānn* (sg. *ġinn*, pl. *ġunūn*), with a morpheme of broken plural /ā/¹⁹. The Aramaic *gny*' (feminine plural *gnyt*'; cf. *gnnh* with reference to the goddess 'Anāt)²⁰ is related to the Akkadian etymon *ginū* / *ginā*. A proper noun masculine *gny*' is also documented in Palmyrene²¹. Without referring to du Mesnil's remarks nor Torrey, Milik²² and other scholars' hypothesis²³, we should reject the etymology stated by some scholars, who did connect Aramaic *gny*' with Arabic *ġinn*, whence the latter is badly explained from the Latin *genius*²⁴. Likewise, *ġinn* does not come from the Ethiopic *gennəwo* either, as it has been pointed out²⁵. Far from it, the term *ġinn* is a loanword from the Aramaic *gennayē*²⁶, which comes

¹⁹ See Federico CORRIENTE, *Problemática de la pluralidad en semítico: el plural fracto*, Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1971, p. 54.

²⁰ Cf. F. Xav. KORTLEITNER, *De Judaeorum in Elephantine-Syene colonia eiusque rationibus cum veteri testamento intercedentibus*, «Commentationes biblicae» II, Oeniponte: Typis et sumptibus Feliciani Rauch, 1927, p. 16.

²¹ J. B. SEGAL, "New Syriac Inscriptions from Edessa", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 22 (1959), pp. 30-31. Cf. J. B. SEGAL, *Edessa 'The Blessed City'*, «Gorgias Reprint Series» 1, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2001 (= Oxford, 1970), p. 2, n. 1; Han J.W. DRIJVERS & John F. HEALEY, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene. Texts, translations and Commentary*, «Handbuch der Orientalistik» 42, Leiden - Boston - Köln: Brill, 1999, pp. 59-60, pl. 4 - AS7.

²² See Roberto BERTOLINO, *Corpus des inscriptions sémitiques de Doura-Europos*, pp. 13-14.

²³ Jean-Baptiste YON, "De l'araméen en grec", *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph [Mélanges en l'honneur de Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais]*, ed. by J.-B. YON & P.-L. GATIER] LX (2007), pp. 400-401.

²⁴ Alphonse MINGANA, "Syriac influence on the style of the Kur'ān", *Bulletin of The John Rylands Library* 11: 1 (1927), p. 90.

²⁵ See Theodor NÖLDEKE, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1910, p. 63, and Wolf LESLAU, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic)*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991, p. 199a-b.

²⁶ Siegmund FRAENKEL, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1886 (reed. Hildesheim - New York: Georg Olms, 1982), p. 179; E. S. DROWER & R. MACUCH, *A Mandaic Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963, p. 91a; Carl BROCKELMANN, *Lexicon Syriacum*, Halis Saxoniæ: Max Niemeyer, 1928, 2nd ed. (reed. Hildesheim - Zürich - New York: Georg Olms, 1995), p. 123a. Cf. Juan Pedro MONFERRER-SALA, "Notas lexicográficas sobre textos árabes extralámicos", *Estudios de Dialectología Norteafricana y Andalusí* 9 (2005), p. 81 § 3.9.

from the Akkadian *ginū / ginā*, a loanword from Sumerian²⁷. The concept *gennayē* (> *ǧinn*) refers to a sort of good minor gods or a kind of guardian spirits²⁸ in the South-Mesopotamian and North-Arabian area. In fact, in the Arabian environment the concept was used for naming unreal creatures of various types and idols as well. Among the Christian Arabs, for instance, the word *ǧinn* is used for rendering terms like *daimónia*²⁹.

ʿbd → ‘do, make’: verb, third person singular perfective. The root *ʿbd* has cognates in the remaining Semitic languages. The verb *ʿbd* occurs twice (1st p. sg. [line 4] & 3rd p. pl. [line 9], both in perf.) in the most ancient Syriac inscription from Birecik (Turkey), the old Birtā (dated in the year 6 AD), for mentioning the construction of a grave³⁰. The verb *ʿbd* is frequently used in Nabataean inscriptions by the lapicides³¹.

bnyšm → ‘Ben-Yišam’?: proper noun singular. The biblical Yišēmā’ (rendered in the Syriac text of the Pešittā like *Nešmā*) has been proposed as an explanation of the Palmyrene form³². The consonantal *ductus yšm* ‘ can be read in a Jewish ‘bull’ from the 8th-7th c. BC., albeit it is a hypothetical reading that can be reconstructed like *Yšm* ‘*l*, because of the fragmentary conditions of the clay piece³³. The name is based on the well-known Semitic genealogical formula ‘ben + proper noun’, which first word is well documented in Phoenician,

²⁷ Wolfram VON SODEN, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972, 1981, 1985, I, *sub voce*; cf. Jeremy BLACK et al., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, «SANTAG» 5, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2000, 2nd corrected edition, *sub voce*.

²⁸ Delbert R. HILLERS & Eleonora CUSSINI, *Palmyrene Aramaic texts*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996, 1704.

²⁹ Rita LUCARELLI, “I demoni nel Libro dei Morti”, *Aegyptus* 85:1-2 (2005), p. 38.

³⁰ J. B. SEGAL, *Edessa ‘The Blessed City’*, p. 23, n. 3. Cf. Jean STARCKY, “Les premières inscriptions syriaques”, *Bible et Terre Sainte* 119: 4-7 (1970), p. 4; Han J.W. DRIJVERS & John F. HEALEY, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene*, pp. 140-144, pl. 40 - AS55-a/b.

³¹ Jean CANTINEAU, *Le nabatéen*, II, pp. 5-6, 35-36, 43-44.

³² Roberto BERTOLINO, *Corpus des inscriptions sémitiques de Doura-Europos*, p. 14.

³³ A. LEMAIRE - H. NUTKOWICZ, “Nouvelles bulles inscrites et anépigraphes de l’époque royale israélite”, in A. GONZÁLEZ BLANCO - J. P. VITA & J. A. ZAMORA (eds.), *De la tablilla a la inteligencia artificial*, «Oriente Próximo» 1-2, 2 vols., Zaragoza: Instituto de Estudios Islámicos y del Oriente Próximo, 2003, I, p. 423, pl. 7 in p. 434.

(‘NATIONAL MUSEUM’, DAMASCUS, C954)

Ugaritic, Hebrew, Punic, and also in Arabic (cf. *ibn*), from an Akkadian etymon *bi/ūnu*. Although a form *bn yšm* ‘ occurs in Ugaritic dialect³⁴, however, it should be stressed the need to reassert the influence of North-Arabic dialect upon the Palmyrene Aramaic³⁵, as it can be deduced from the number of Arabic names in the area³⁶.

mt’ → ‘gift (of)’: proper noun masculine. This form is documented in Palmyrene Aramaic texts³⁷. The name, which is transliterated in Greek like *Maththas* (cf. *Maththaïos* < Hebrew *Mattēnay*, abbreviation of *Mattanēyāh*), is related to the Hebrew-Aramaic *Matta’ī* / *Mattay*, two abbreviated forms from *Mattityāhū* (‘gift of God’; cf. Greek *Mattathias*), a name that was popular in late Old Testament and Maccabean times³⁸.

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³⁴ G. DEL OLMO LETE - J. SANMARTÍN, *Diccionario de la lengua ugarítica*, 2 vols., «Aula Orientalis. Supplemeta» 7-8, Sabadell, 1996-2000, II, p. 542a.

³⁵ See, for instance Mohammed MARAQTEN, “The Arabic words in Palmyrene inscriptions”, *Aram Periodical* 7 (1995), pp. 89-108. See for Nabatean M. O’CONNOR, “The Arabic loanwords in Nabatean Aramaic”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45 (1986), pp. 213-229. See also J.C. GREENFIELD, “Some Arabic loanwords in the Aramaic and Nabatean texts from Naḥal Ḥever”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 15 (1992), pp. 10-21.

³⁶ See J.B. SEGAL, “Arabs at Hatra and the vicinity: marginalia on new Aramaic texts”, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 31 (1986), pp. 57-80.

³⁷ Stanley A. COOK, *A glossary of the Aramaic inscriptions*, p. 79.

³⁸ M. NÖTH, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung*, Hildesheim: Olms, 1966, p. 170.

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SUMARIO

En el presente artículo ofrecemos unas notas lingüísticas a una inscripción en arameo palmireno, actualmente expuesta en el 'Museo Nacional' de Damasco. Dado que dicha inscripción en cuestión viene siendo materia de discusión entre los especialistas desde comienzos de los años treinta del siglo XX hasta la actualidad, pretendemos contribuir al debate científico con una serie de comentarios lingüísticos a todos los términos de la inscripción, pero incidiendo en aquellas palabras que siguen presentando inconvenientes interpretativos con el propósito de arrojar conclusiones más claras.

ABSTRACT

In the present article we offer some linguistic remarks on a Palmyrene Aramaic inscription, which is currently exhibited at the ‘National Museum’ of Damascus. Since this inscription is the subject of a debate among the scholars from the beginning of the thirties in the last century to nowadays, our aim is to contribute to the scientific discussion with a series of linguistic remarks to all words of the inscription. However, we will focus on those terms, which still offer some interpretative problems with the purpose of yielding more clear conclusions.