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A parallel to the Second Commandment in the inscriptions of Raybūn

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'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them...' (Ex. 20:4-5).¹

This statement included in the Second Commandment is usually considered to be an integral and inseparable part of the strict monotheism. It has seemed self-evident that the religion based on the worship of the unique and invisible God imposed on the Hebrews the complete rejection of any idolatry, of any cult image. To the best of my knowledge no attempt has been made until now to discover the origins of the Second Commandment in ancient Semitic beliefs. This is hardly surprising since among Western and Eastern Semites in antiquity, as well as among pre-Islamic Arabs, the adoration of statues of their deities was widespread. As to the remaining South Semitic peoples (South Arabians and ancient Ethiopians), the information extracted from both epigraphic and narrative sources about their polytheistic religion has been, and to some extent still remains, limited, superficial and often inexact.

Among the epigraphic materials discovered by the Soviet-Yemenite Complex (*i.e.* multi-disciplinary) Expedition (SOYCE) in 1983-1991 at the site of Raybūn in inland Ḥaḍramawt there are three inscriptions, one complete and two fragmentary, which contain very interesting and important data on the attitude of official South Arabian polytheism

towards creating images of deities. Their provenance as coming from in the temples of the goddess Dhāt Ḥimyam is assured: the complete text was put together from numerous fragments excavated in the ruins of Na'mān (Raybūn V), while two others were found in Raḥbān (Raybūn I).² Their linguistic peculiarities (the use of the verb 'to dedicate' with the prefix *s*^l- (*s*^l*qny*) and of the Hadramitic attached pronoun *-s*³ (sing. f.) instead of *-t*) and their paleography indicate that these inscriptions belong to stage IV of the chronological scheme elaborated by Bauer for Raybūn (Bauer 1989: 154 fig. 1; 1995: 126 fig. 2, 144 fig. 3). It seems preferable, however, to call that stage, which embraced the second-first centuries BC,³ as the 'classic' period. All the three texts are published here for the first time.

**Rb V/91 no. 61 + 52 + 54 + 62 + 67 + 60 + 53
+ 57**

Description

This text (Fig. 1, a & b) was inscribed on eight rectangular slabs of different sizes (29 x 40 cm; 30 x 21 cm; 19 x 25 cm; 19 x 25 cm; 17 x 14 cm; 24 x 39 cm; 24 x 25 cm; 22 x 36 cm), all of which are broken with the exception of no. 53 and no. 57. Three of the slabs (no. 61, no. 52, no. 60) are incomplete and have small lacunae. The signs are quite large (6 cm high; 2 cm wide) and their coefficient of proportion (*i.e.* the ratio of the character's average width to the half of its average height) is equal to 0.67.

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Text

1. <S²>W#K-N/bn/KWF<>#L/s¹qny
2. [D] <T>/HMYM/bht-<h>#n/dt/r
3. ḏw#t¹/lhn-s¹/tḥ#tn/S¹Y<N>
4. D-M#<Y>F<-N/b-yd/<>#b-s¹/- 5. F²L/b-^{*}*b#r/dt/tḥ#<d>/wr
- 6. wt-m/bn/#<m>#hrm-s³/w-#bn-mw
- 7. KWF²L/<y>#<s³><t>wr/<d>-y#h<l>k
- 8. ms³l-s³#/w-[td]#<>#<S²>#WK-N/b-²
- 9. dn/DT</>#<H>#<M>YM/#DT/N^cM-N
- 10. b-s³wb-h-#s¹/w-#r<>#-s¹/r²b-s³
- 11. d-yn^cm

Translation (literal)

⁽¹⁾Shawkān, son of KawḤil, dedicated to ⁽²⁾[Dhā]t Ḥimyam the (votive) phallus, with which she ⁽³⁾was satisfied for his sake, by the authority of Sīn ⁽⁴⁾dhū Mayfa‘ān instead of his father K[aw-] ⁽⁵⁾Ḥil, because a sacrilege had moved aside ⁽⁶⁾from her temple. And from ⁽⁷⁾KawḤil may be remitted that he *yhlk* ⁽⁸⁾her image. And Shawkān [plac]ed under the ⁽⁹⁾will of Dhāt Ḥimyam dhāt Na‘mān ⁽¹⁰⁾by his offering (by his repenting of sin ?) and by his reconciliation the reconciliation with her ⁽¹¹⁾which may be favourable.

Translation (idiomatic)

⁽¹⁾Shawkān, son of KawḤil, dedicated to ⁽²⁾[Dhā]t Ḥimyam the (votive) phallus, which she ⁽³⁾accepted as full satisfaction for his sake, by the authority of Sīn ⁽⁴⁾dhū Mayfa‘ān, acting for his father K[aw-] ⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾Ḥil, because a sacrilege in her temple had been averted. And ⁽⁷⁾may KawḤil be absolved from *yhlk* ⁽⁸⁾her image. And Shawkān [confi]ded to the will of Dhāt Ḥimyam dhāt Na‘mān ⁽¹⁰⁾by his offering (repentance?) and by his reconciliation, the reconciliation with her ⁽¹¹⁾which may be favourable.

Commentary

Lines 1-3: the interpretation of this dedicatory formula has been already given in: Frantsouzoff 1995: 16-18. This is the first occurrence of these names in pre-Islamic Arabia.

Lines 3-4: *tḥn/S¹Y<N>* *D-M<Y>F<-N*: a close parallel to this expression - *tḥn/S¹YN/D-²LM* 'by the authority of Sīn dhū Alim' - is attested in some of the inscriptions from the temple of Mayfa‘ān (Frantsouzoff 1995: 18). Both expressions may reflect the hierarchy of deities in the pantheon of

FIGURE 1a. Rb V/91 no. 61 + 52 + 54 + 62 + 67 + 60 + 53 + 57.

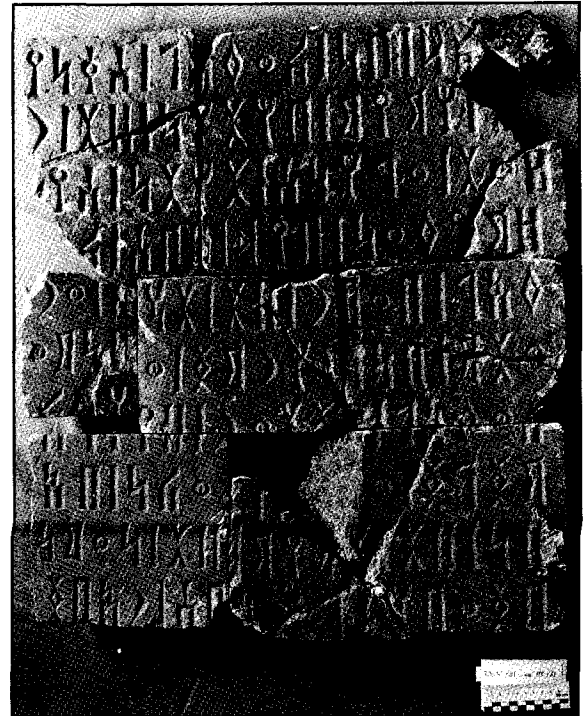


FIGURE 1b. End of the inscription



ancient Ḥaḍramawt.

Lines 4-5: *b-yd/<>b-s¹/: in Semitic languages the combination of the preposition *b-* with the noun 'hand' (*bē-yad* in Hebrew; *ba-‘ēda*, *ba-‘ēdawa* in Ge‘ez - Leslau 1987: 7) usually signifies*

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'through, by means of ..., by the intermediary of ..., thanks to ...', but this sense is not appropriate to the present context which clearly states that Shawkân offered this dedication to obtain an absolution for his father, substituting for him, acting instead of him.

Lines 5-6: *b-^{*}br/dt/th<ḏ>/wrwt-m/bn/<m>hrm-s³*: in the epigraphy of Raybūn the subordinating conjunction *b-^{*}br/dt*, carved here with an obvious mistake (*w* in place of ^ʿ*ayn*), has the causal meaning 'since, because' and introduces the so-called 'narrative' section of the standard dedication to Dhāt Ḥimyam (Frantsouzoff 1995: 18-19). The term *wrwt*, already attested in Rb I/84 no. 197 a-e = SOYCE 705, l. 5, has been interpreted as 'an insult or an injury to a deity', i.e. 'a sacrilege' (Frantsouzoff 1997: 117). The translation of the verbal form *thḏ* presents considerable difficulties. Firstly, it can be considered morphologically either as an imperfect sing. f. of the ground-stem or as a perfect sing. m. of the *t*- prefix stem of a verb with initial *w* (like *tḏ* below) or of a geminate verb. Both tenses (or aspects) occur after the conjunction *b-^{*}br/dt* (cf. Rb I/89 no. 291 *etc.*, ll. 4-5 and Rb I/84 no. 196 *etc.*, ll. 2-3 partly published in Frantsouzoff 1995: 19). It is not at all easy to discover the root from which *thḏ* is derived: it could be ḤW(Y)ḏ, WḤḏ, Ḥḏḏ, ḤW(Y)Z, ḤZZ, WḤZ.⁴ After a thorough examination of possible etymological parallels it seems preferable to connect this form with the root ḤWZ which is attested in the Modern South Arabian languages. Its derivatives, namely the verbs *xōz*, *xāz* in Ḥarsūsi⁵ *xēz* in Jibbāli and *xōz* in Mehri, have the same meaning 'to deviate, to move aside from ...' (Johnstone 1977: 145; 1981: 311; 1987: 457) which appears appropriate to the situation described in this text: the dedicant probably wanted to emphasise that in spite of the offence committed by his father any resulting sacrilege had not desecrated the temple of the goddess. The imperfect here renders the simple, not continuous, past.⁶ This phenomenon, typical of the texts of Raybūn, rarely occurs in Sabaic (Beeston 1984: § 7:6).

Lines 6-8, *w-bn-mw KWF²L/<y><s³³l-s³*: the formula with the verb *s³twr* has been examined in detail, including a translation of this passage, in Frantsouzoff 1995: 19-21. However, in that article I wrongly interpreted the verbal form *yhlk* as 'he injured' (Frantsouzoff 1995: 21, 26: n.

32). A parallel with *halaka* 'to perish' in Arabic proved to be forced and inexact: moreover, the Arabic verb is intransitive. It was the context in Rb I/88 no. 130 = SOYCE 1736 published below that enabled me to discover the true sense of *hlk* in Hadramitic.

Though most probably the goddess' statue or graven image is here implied, it seems better to give *ms³l* a more general sense - 'image' (cf. *ml* in Sabaic - Beeston *et al.* 1982: 88).

Lines 8-11: the formula introduced by the expression *w-tḏ¹/N/b-²dn/DT/ḤMYM*, as well as the term *r¹b* which often occurs in it, have been scrutinized in Frantsouzoff 1995: 21-3. As for *s³wb-h-s¹*, it is to be compared with derivatives from the root TWB in the Qatabanic inscription RÉS 4329/3: *...bn/mtb-m/twbw/l-²l-s¹m⁶M/...* - '... from the offering which they made (litt. offered) to their god 'Amm ...' (Ricks 1989: 178-9).⁷ The translation 'offering', however, seems too vague here. Thus a parallel with the Arabic expression *tāba* (or *tāba*) *ilā-²llāhi* 'he returned unto God, i.e. he repented towards God' (Lane 1863-93 I: 321, 361) is not excluded. The so-called 'parasitic' *h* inserted in *s³wb-h-s¹* occurs frequently before attached pronouns in Hadramitic nouns and verbs (Frantsouzoff, forthcoming: section II:2).

The same expression with the verb *yhlk* is also attested in the fragmentary inscription from the temple of Raḥbān:

Rb I/89 no. 298, 300 = SOYCE 1867

Description

Only two slabs of this inscription bearing its beginning and its end have been discovered (Fig. 2 - only Rb I/89 no. 300) (20.4 x 38.5 cm; 54.0 x 38.5 cm). It is not possible to determine the size of the lacuna between them. The characters are larger than in the previous text (height - 5.8 cm; width - 2.18 cm; coefficient of proportion - 0.75).

Text A

1. ²*LḏKR/bn/ḤM⁶-M*
2. *s¹qny/DT/ḤMYM/*
3. *bht/rḏwt⁶lhn*
- [4]. [4.] [*-s¹*] or [*²LḏKR*] ...

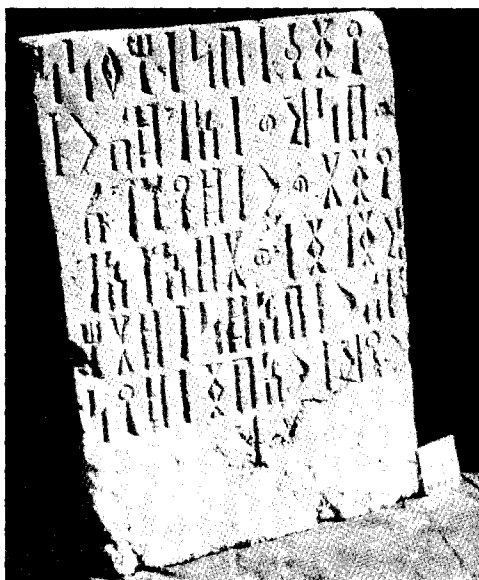
Text B

1. *ys³q/bn/hfn-n*

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2. *w-bn-mw/ᶜLDKR/*
3. *ys³twr/d-yh³lk*
4. *ms³l-s³/w-tᶜlᶜL*
5. *DKR/b-ᶜdn/DT-H*
6. *MYM/r³b-s³/d-yn*
7. *ᶜm*

FIGURE 2. SOYCE 1867 (Rb I/89 no. 300): second part of the inscription.



Translation A

⁽¹⁾Ildhakar, son of Kham^ᶜum, ⁽²⁾dedicated to Dhāt Ḥimyam ⁽³⁾the (votive) phallus, with which she was satisfied for ⁽⁴⁾[his sake,] or [the sake of Ildhakar,]

.....

Translation B (literal)

⁽¹⁾..... ^(?) ⁽²⁾And from Ildhakar ⁽³⁾may be remitted that he *yh³lk* ⁽⁴⁾her image. And Ildhakar placed ⁽⁵⁾under the will of Dhāt Ḥi-⁽⁶⁾myam the reconciliation with her which may be fa-⁽⁷⁾vourable.

Translation B (idiomatic)

⁽¹⁾..... ^(?) ⁽²⁾and may Ildhakar ⁽³⁾be absolved from *yh³lk* ⁽⁴⁾her image. And Ildhakar confided ⁽⁵⁾to the will of Dhāt Ḥi-⁽⁶⁾myam the reconciliation with her which may be fa-⁽⁷⁾vourable.

Commentary

Line A/1: This is the first example of the name ᶜldkr in the Arabian onomasticon. I prefer to read his

patronymic as Kham^ᶜum, not as Khamma^ᶜamm, since the same name without mimation (*Ḥm^ᶜ*) occurs in Minaic (Lankester Harding 1971: 229; Arbach 1993: II, 61). In Arab genealogies there is also a name which derives from the root ḤM^ᶜ - Khumā^ᶜa (Caskel 1966: I, Taf. 144, II, 348).

Line A/3: *bht/rᶜdwt^ᶜlhn* ...: this relative clause is linked asyndetically with the antecedent *bht* which can be regarded as a construct form (Beeston 1984, §§ 12:2, 26:4).

Line B/1: *ys³q/bn/hfn-n*: it is very difficult to interpret this passage because of the lack of context. In Sabaic the verbal form *ys³q* occurs once (RÉS 4689/4) and is translated, very unreliably, as 'to bring together, to gather' (Biella 1982: 151).⁸ The unique inscription of uncertain provenance (but obviously Sabaic), where the term *hfn* in the dual is attested (...*hfn-nhn/bn/fr^ᶜt/fr^ᶜ-hw* '... two *hfn* consisting of the first-fruits he offered to him (i.e. to the god Dhū Samawī)' in RÉS 4930), clearly demonstrates that this noun denotes either a sort of container or a unit of measure (cf. Biella 1982: 182).⁹

The accurate sense of the verb *yh³lk* in these two inscriptions can be elucidated thanks to the context of the following fragment discovered in Raḥbān:

FIGURE 3. SOYCE 1736 (Rb I/88 no. 130).



Rb I/88 no. 130 = SOYCE 1736

Description

This fragment (Fig. 3) is engraved on a rectangular slab (24.0 x 29.1 cm) coloured red and in a very

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good state of preservation. The dimensions of the characters are harmonious (height 6.03 cm; average width 1.88 cm) and the coefficient of proportion (0.62) is close to the golden section (0.618...).

Text

1. *s¹/ḏt-wrwt/b-ḏt/...*
2. *bs³-h-s¹/w-bn-mw/Y[.../ys³twr]*
- 3-[4.] *ḏ-ygs¹m/ms³l-s³/w-t[ḏ/Y.../b-ḏn/
ḏT/HMYM/...]*

Translation

(1) ... that was a sacrilege against that ...⁽²⁾... And from Y[... may be remitted]⁽³⁻⁴⁾that he shaped her image. And [Y...] pl[aced under the will of Dhāt Ḥimyam ...]

Commentary

Line 1: in this context *wrwt* would seem to be a verb in the perfect (sing. f.), rather than a noun.

Line 2: *bs³-h-s¹*: it is not possible to propose any reasonable interpretation of this word or even to decide whether it is fragmentary or complete.

w-bn-mw/Y[.../ys³twr]: this restoration is trustworthy, since in the inscriptions of Raybūn the preposition *bn* followed by the enclitic *-mw* always introduces the formula with the verb *s³twr*.

Line 3: *ḏ-ygs¹m/ms³l-s³*: the general sense of the term *gs¹m*, which among the epigraphic South Arabian languages is attested only in Hadramitic as a verb (RÉS 3869/2) and as a noun (*gs¹m-hy* - RÉS 2687/3; pl. *ḡs¹m* - Khor Rori 1/4, 2/5), is obviously connected with an aspect of construction. But the translations proposed for it such as 'exécuter en construction massive' (RÉS 3869), '(bei) der massiven Aufführung' (RÉS 2687) or 'realisation/realization (sic!)' (Khor Rori 1, 2) seem to be rather inexact. Probably it would be better to look to Arabic *ḡism* 'body' and to suppose that the derivatives of this root in Hadramitic render an idea of shaping, forming, fashioning. Thus the meaning 'to shape' is more suitable for this context than 'to construct'.

In all probability the verb *yhlk* used in the formula with *s³twr* in the same position and with the same direct object as *ygs¹m* must have a similar meaning. Moreover, this interpretation is corroborated by an etymological and semantic parallel with *s¹hlk* 'to complete, to effect, to bring

about' and *mhlk* 'construction, reconstruction, undertaking, project' in Qatabanic (Ricks 1989: 45-6).¹⁰ Thus we can propose a reliable translation of the whole passage in both inscriptions, where this verb occurs:

w-bn-mw/N/ys³twr/ḏ-yhlk/ms³l-s³ - 'And may N (KawḤil or Ildhakar) be absolved from making (or probably erecting) her (*i.e.* the goddess) image (statue)'.

It follows from the three texts interpreted above that in ancient Raybūn the creation of images of deities was considered as a wrong, sinful action which required repentance. In Rb V/91 no. 61 *etc.*, ll. 5-6 the dedicant emphasized as an extenuating circumstance that 'a sacrilege in her temple had been averted'. He was probably implying that the statue of Dhāt Ḥimyam made by his father had not been brought into the sanctuary. This negative attitude of the official religion towards representations of divinities is here attested for the first time in the South Arabian inscriptions. Was it a general feature of the polytheism in ancient Yemen? The most important, but indirect evidence in favour of such a hypothesis consists in the complete lack of any statue or picture of a god or a goddess of the local pantheon among the numerous artefacts of the South Arabian civilization.¹¹

It is noteworthy that three stone statuettes discovered in the Wādī Ḥidim in inland Ḥaḏramawt in 1989 and identified as objects of religious cult were probably connected with the non-agricultural population of that region (Sedov & Saqqāf 1992).¹² Perhaps the infringement of the prohibition against the creation of images of deities referred to in the three texts from Raybūn was provoked by the influence of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes which inhabited peripheral areas of Southern Arabia and adhered to idolatry. Almost nothing is known about them before the beginning of the Christian era.

Is it possible to suppose that the Second Commandment and the strong disapproval of making representations of deities in ancient Raybūn have some common roots? In spite of a current opinion, the demand for an aniconic cult in Judaism 'does not prohibit objects of religious art which are not intended as objects of worship (*e.g.*, cherubim, trees, lions, cattle (I Kings 6:32ff., 29; 7:25, 29)' (Greenberg n.d.: col. 1442). Therefore the presence

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of various examples of the plastic arts in South Arabian sites and even in their sanctuaries¹³ does not completely contradict the original sense of the Second Commandment. To my mind, it would be reasonable to assume that some specific beliefs of a group of early Semitic tribes, a sort of taboo imposed on the creation of images of deities, was the origin of both a prescription of the South Arabian polytheistic religion and a statement of the Mosaic law.

Notes

- ¹ The English translation of the Bible is cited here according to the authorized (King James) version. The other variant of the Decalogue has only some stylistic divergences from the text cited above: 'Thou shalt not make thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters beneath the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them...' (Deut. 5:8-9).
- ² On the identification of these sanctuaries see: Frantsouzoff 1995: 15.
- ³ As A.V. Sedov kindly informed me, some unpublished results of the C₁₄ analyses indicate that the beginning of this period is to be antedated to the mid-3th century BC.
- ⁴ The interdental phonemes disappeared in Hadramitic and in the monumental inscriptions of Raybūn the character *d* supplanted *z* to denote the sound [z] almost everywhere (Frantsouzoff, forthcoming: section II:1; cf. Beeston 1984: § H 2:2).
- ⁵ In the system of transcription brought into use by T.M. Johnstone the phoneme *ḥ* is always rendered as 'x'.
- ⁶ Sometimes in the inscriptions of Raybūn the imperfect in subordinate clauses can express a continuous act in the past (cf. Frantsouzoff 1995: 25: n. 24).
- ⁷ In the spelling of the inscriptions of Raybūn belonging to the 'classic' period the character *t* was entirely replaced by *s*³ (cf. n. 4).
- ⁸ We should probably refrain from any interpretation of this form (cf. Beeston *et al.* 1982: 164). The causative stem of the same Sabaic verb (*hws³q-n*) means 'to fill in a wall' (Beeston *et al.* 1982: 164; cf. Biella 1982: 152).

It is not impossible that in Hadramitic *ys³q* has a similar sense.

- ⁹ The interpretation of *hfn* in this case as a type of votive object (Beeston *et al.* 1982: 66) seems impossible. In Gl A 668/3 the reading *hfn* is uncertain and the context is fragmentary and obscure.
- ¹⁰ I remarked on this parallel in an earlier article, but unfortunately underestimated it (see Frantsouzoff 1995: 26: n. 32).
- ¹¹ The persistent attempts of J. Pirenne to identify men and women represented in sculptures and on reliefs with South Arabian gods and goddesses (cf., for instance, CIAS 1.359-72, 1.411-54, II.275-8, II.337, II.343-8) has proved to be entirely unconvincing and groundless. In some cases the fallibility of her argument was perfectly demonstrated by S. Ja. Bersina (Bersina 1988: 96-106; 1994: 207-19) who revealed in particular that the statue of the so-called 'Lady Bar'at' was the portrait of the Ptolemaic queen Arsinoë III (235-205 BC), not of Dhāt Ḥimyam as J. Pirenne claimed (CIAS 1.365-72).
- ¹² Their dating to the 2nd millennium BC is, however, rather uncertain (Sedov & Saqqāf 1992: 128).
- ¹³ In the temples of Raybūn, for instance, some limestone statues of ibex, the principal object of the ritual hunt, have been discovered. Were these representations only dedicated to a deity or really worshipped? There is certainly no convincing argument for considering ibexes and other South Arabian 'sacred' animals as divine symbols.

Abbreviations and sigla of the inscriptions cited

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