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A Minaic inscription on the pedestal of an ibex figurine from the British Museum

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Summary

Among the unpublished inscriptions of ancient Yemen kept in the collection of the British Museum a short text engraved on the pedestal of an ibex figurine cut in limestone proves to be of considerable value for the study of South Arabian religion and lexicography.

The use of the verb *s'brrt* as well as the lack of mīmation in the noun *'lb* testify that the language of this text is Minaic. However, it contains a reference to the oath of the goddess Athīrat (°*TRT*) whose name is mentioned rather seldom in Minaic inscriptions (only in those among them which originate in Nashshān), but frequently occurs in Qatabanic epigraphic tradition.

The expression °*TRT*°*lb* "Athīrat of °*ilb*-tree", which is interpreted as the first allusion to the worship of sacred trees in ancient South Arabia, represents a close parallel to the cult of the Canaanite goddess Asherah described in the Bible.

From the lexicographical point of view, the importance of this text is connected with a new interpretation of *s'brrt* usually attested in syndetic subordinate clauses after *krb* (pl. °*krb*) "offering" and *kbwdt* (pl.) "taxes, duties". Its previous translations "to offer", "to pay" implied the identification of the subject in those clauses with a worshipper of a deity. The context *b-krb/s'brrt* demonstrates that in fact this verb means "to accept, approve" and describes a divine action, since this verbal form (3rd pers., feminine, perfect) obviously relates to Athīrat and not to her devotee who is a man (°*MYD*°/*bn*/*YT*°*KRB*).

Keywords: Religion of ancient Yemen, Minaic epigraphy, cult of sacred trees, South Arabian goddess Athīrat, Canaanite goddess Asherah

During my first sojourn in the United Kingdom, when I was invited by Professor A.F.L. Beeston to take part in the Seminar for Arabian Studies of 1994, I had the chance to visit the British Museum together with my late teacher Professor Avraam G. Lundin (Loundine), although the Seminar itself was held at that fortunate time in Oxford. It stands to reason that the permanent exhibition on South Arabia¹ was of special interest to us. Among the artefacts presented in it A.G. Lundin drew my attention to two inscribed objects which, to the best of his knowledge, had not yet been published: the fragmentary bronze altar with an early Sabaic dedication to a hitherto unknown deity Rahmaw and the ibex figurine with a Minaic text on three lateral sides of its pedestal.² Both objects were purchased and their provenance remains uncertain. A.F.L. Beeston confirmed that the inscriptions on them were unpublished and pointed out that the Minaic one, despite its brevity, appeared to be of considerable significance. Unfortunately we had no other chance to discuss this matter with our highly esteemed colleague...

In the present paper this Minaic text, designated with

the siglum LuBM 2 (Lundin — British Museum no. 2) is discussed below with a detailed commentary.³

LuBM 2

Description

The object is cut from a small limestone block. The figurine of an ibex about 14 cm high is roughly sculpted on a pedestal in the form of a rectangular prism (10 x 16 x 16 cm). This figurine is not carved in the round but is connected at the back with a vertical rectangular "wall" about 20–21 cm high and 4 cm thick. The pedestal bears a short inscription of two lines which continues around three sides (Figs 1, 2a–c).

The depictions of ibex (*Capra nubiana nubiana* F. Cuvier) occupy a considerable place in the iconography of ancient South Arabia, but for the most part they are represented on altars sometimes decorated only with the heads of this animal or on reliefs with rows of couchant and passant ibex, while stone figurines of a single ibex prove to be of rare occurrence. They are found mainly



FIGURE 1

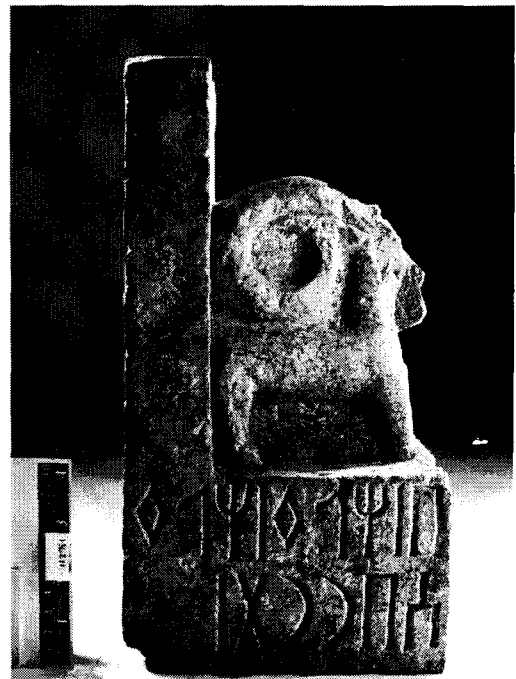


FIGURE 2A



FIGURE 2B

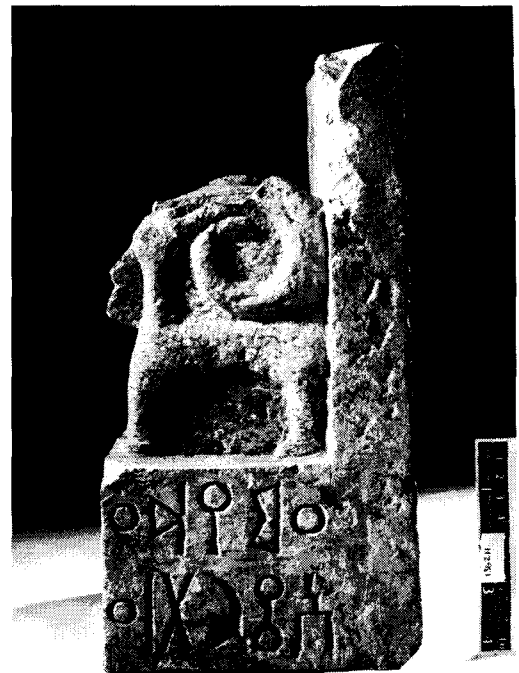


FIGURE 2C

FIGURE 1. & FIGURE 2. *A Minaic inscription on a limestone figure of an ibex.*

in Ḥaḍramawt, for instance, at the sites of Mashgha and Raybūn I, and are products of the same technique as the object discussed here.⁴ The well-known statuette of an ibex with the earliest inscription of the *mukarrib* of Ḥaḍramawt, which is kept in al-Mukallaḥ Museum and probably originates in Ḥurayḍa (MM 219),⁵ bears the closest resemblance to our figurine. However, the differences are significant. The most important of them consists in the clearly accentuated three-dimensional aspect of the object from the British Museum, whereas the figurines of ibex found in Ḥaḍramawt are carved in the manner like two-dimensional reliefs.

Palaeography and dating

The principal peculiarities of the script attested in the inscription on the pedestal, *viz.* the rounded *r*, the large circles in the *y*, *t* and *ayn*, the big triangle of the *d*, the slightly inclined intermediary lines in the *n* as well as in the apex of the *alif*, the "open" *m* and the *f*, shorter than the adjacent characters, correspond perfectly to those of RÉS 3022 which describes the events connected with the so-called Minaeo-Egyptian (or Minaeo-Persian) synchronism and is of the utmost importance for relating the ancient South Arabian history to the absolute chronological scale.⁶ According to the "longer" chronology, which is now well founded and generally recognized, RÉS 3022 was compiled between the late sixties of the fifth and the middle of the fourth century BC.⁷ Approximately the same dating is to be attributed to the text published below, *i.e.* between the sixth and fourth centuries BC.

Text

A B C

1. ^cMYD^c#bn/YT^cKR#B/ḥlf/ḥlf
2. ^ʔTRT^c#lb/b-krb/#s'brrt/

Translation

1. 'Ammīyada' son of Yatha'karib swore the oath of
2. (the goddess) Athīrat of ^cilb-tree on account of the offering that She accepted.

Commentary

Line 1:

^cMYD^c. This personal name is of frequent occurrence in the Sabaic, Minaic, and Qatabanic onomastics (Harding 1971: 443; Tairan 1992: 172; Arbach 1993, ii: 21; Al-

Said 1995: 39, 145; Hayajneh 1998: 203, 333). It is attested in a graffito discovered on the territory of ancient Ḥaḍramawt (Ja 2494d) and in an unpublished Hadhramitic inscription from the Mayfa'ān temple at Raybūn (Rb XIV/87 no. 6 = SOYCE 1133/1).

YT^cKRB. Widespread in Sabaic, this name also occurs in Minaic and Qatabanic (Harding 1971: 659; Tairan 1992: 237–238; Arbach 1993, ii: 163; Al-Said 1995: 49, 181; Hayajneh 1998: 271, 350). As to the Hadhramitic epigraphic documentation, it is found in at least three unpublished texts from Mayfa'ān (Rb XIV/87 no. 64 = SOYCE 1183/1; Rb XIV/89 no. 102 = SOYCE 2017/1; Rb XIV/90 no. 251 = SOYCE 2566).⁸

Lines 1–2:

ḥlf/ḥlf | ^ʔTRT^clb. In ancient Yemen the authors of inscriptions sometimes swore by the names of their deities, mostly by 'Athtar, the supreme god of the South Arabian pantheon. In parallel Sabaic contexts the derivatives of the root GZM (instead of HLF)⁹ were normally used: *f*-(g)zmw/gz(m)^cTTR (Fa 64/5); *gzmw/gzm^cTTR/d-DBN* (CIH 435/1); *k-gzmw/gzm^cTTR/S²RQ-n* (Gl 1388/1); *w-r^c/(k-gz)mw/bnw/d-HLF-n/gzm(^l)^cTTR/S²RQ-n/w-^cT | TR/b^cl/BHR/HṬYB-m/w-g(z)m^bLMQHW/b^cl-^ʔ(W)M* (Fa 55/1–2); *k-r^c/k-gzmw/gzm/[t]^cmnt/s²ym-hmw/T^ʔLB/RYM-m/d-^cr-n^cDF* (MA-FRAY — al-Adan 10 + 11 + 12/5–7).¹⁰

Formerly this expression was translated as "(he) swore the oath of Athīrat on account of a plantation of ^cilb-trees (presenting the offering ... etc.)" (Frantsouzoff 2000: 188). However, such an interpretation seems invalid, since there is no other example in ESA languages or in Arabic, where the verb *ḥlf* (or *gzm*) "to swear" governs a direct object in a similar context. Thus ^clb is to be considered as the second element of the *status constructus* directly linked with ^ʔTRT.

The South Arabian goddess Athīrat, who is generally recognized as a counterpart of West Semitic Asherah (^ʔāšēra) (Wyatt 1995: col. 187; Bron 1998a: 75) in consideration of the strict phonological correspondence of their names, was worshipped mostly in Qatabān, *viz.* in Wādī Kharīb where one of her temples is located. She is also attested in a few Minaic inscriptions, which originate in Nashshān (modern site of al-Khariba as-Sawdā' in al-Jawf) (Bron 1995: 432; Bron 1998a). Unfortunately the expression ^ʔTRT^clb "Athīrat of ^cilb-tree" remains without parallel in South Arabian epigraphy. No mention of any sacred tree has yet been found in ancient South Arabian inscriptions. At least, none of the occurrences of ^cilb (*Zizyphus spina Christi* or one of its parent species)¹¹ in epigraphic documenta-

tion are at all connected with a divine cult.¹² Even when a deity is invoked as the lord of sacred animals, like $\text{LMQH/b}^{\text{l}}/\text{w}^{\text{l}}/\text{SRWH}$ "Almaqah, Lord of the ibexes of Širwāh",¹³ a certain copula (*b^l* in our example) is to be inserted between a divinity's name and a common noun denoting animals.

On the contrary, in the paganism of north and central Arabia trees were often considered as deities' incarnations or probably as their places of abode. It is enough to remember the famous story about the sacred tree of the goddess al-^cUzzā in the valley of Nakhla, which was cut by Khālid b. al-Walīd by the Prophet's order (Ibn al-Kalbi 1969: 18–21; 1952: 21–23). In one version of it this kind of tree is not specified (Ibn al-Kalbi 1969: 18, line 8: *šajarah*) but, according to the other, she resided in one of three gum-acacia trees (1969: 19, line 7; 20, line 1: *ṭalāt samurāt*). When Khālid came to destroy the third one, he saw a dreadful Abyssinian woman, killed her, then killed the custodian of her cult (*sādin*) and cut down the tree (1969: 20, line 3 – 21, line 4).

In the Bible āšērā is attested as the proper noun of the Canaanite goddess (Asherah) and as a common noun (sometimes with the article *hā-* or even in the plural: āšērōt and āšērīm), which designates a cult object of this deity: "probably a stylised tree, or a lopped trunk" (Wyatt 1995: col. 187). Deuteronomy 16:21, for instance, strongly prohibits the planting of such a tree: "Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of any trees near unto the altar of the LORD thy God..." ($\text{lō}^{\text{-}}\text{-ṭittā}^{\text{c}} \text{lē-kā} \text{āšērā kol-}^{\text{c}}\text{ēš} \text{ēšel mizbah Yēhōwā} \text{ēlōhē-kā}$). In Judges 6:25–26 it is prescribed to Gideon to throw down the altar of Baal, to cut the Asherah ($\text{hā-}^{\text{c}}\text{āšērā}$) near it, to build an altar for God and to use the tree of this Asherah ($\text{āšē hā-}^{\text{c}}\text{āšērā}$) in a burnt sacrifice (ōlā).

Therefore the Mishnah interprets Asherah simply as a tree (Ābōdā Zārā 3: 7). It should be emphasised that, "the distinction between deity and cult object is ultimately not an ancient, but a modern one" (Wyatt 1995: col. 191).

In the expression $\text{TRT}^{\text{c}}\text{lb}$ the ilb -tree should be understood as an abode of the goddess Athīrat or as her incarnation.¹⁴ In that case a close parallel with the veneration of Asherah is striking. For the first time not only the names of two deities, South Arabian and West Semitic, but also some elements of their cult prove to be distinguished by such a similarity.

Line 2:

b-krb/s'brrt. Thanks to this formula attested only in Minaic the language of the inscription is identified with certainty. Without the preposition *b-* related, in all prob-

ability, to *hlf* it has already been found in MAFRAY — Darb aṣ-Ṣabī 8/4–5 ([k]/rb/s'brrt), and with the masculine form of the verb in MAFRAY — Darb aṣ-Ṣabī 3/3 and Ma'in 43 = M 44 = RÉŠ 2790/2. A rather vague translation of *krb* as "offering" (cf. Arbach 1993, i: 53) is commonly accepted and seems correct in general outlines. As to the verb of "the obscure *sbrt* formula" (Beeston 1953: 200), different interpretations of it have already been proposed: e.g. "to offer" (Beeston 1953: 200) or "s'acquitter de...", "exécuter fidèlement une obligation" (Arbach 1993, i: 23; Bron 1998b: 43, 46, 71). In both cases the predicate expressed by *s'brt* was related to the author or authors of the text. However, the inscription published here clearly demonstrates that the subject of this verb is a deity, not a dedicant, since the feminine form *s'brtt* can agree only with the goddess's name.¹⁵ The comparison with the expressions *abarra-llāhu ḥajja-hu* "God accepted his pilgrimage" and *abarra-llāhu amala-hu* "God accepted his deed, or work, as good; approved it" in classical Arabic (Lane 1863–1893, 1: 175) is to be drawn, since the verb *abarra* is in the causative stem, like *s'brt*, and derives from the same root.

It would be interesting now to verify whether this new meaning of the verb *s'brt(t)* corresponds to other contexts in which it is attested. First of all, the formula with *ktrb*¹⁶ and *s'brt* must be checked. Its principal occurrences are listed in the table (Fig. 3).

It results from these examples that the relative pronoun which precedes the verb *s'brt* takes the place of the nouns *krb* or krb , *kbwdt*, *kbwdt/w-krb*. Although this opinion is recognized by some scholars,¹⁷ it is not clear at all why *s'brt* could not be connected with *ktrb-s'* simply by the coordinating conjunction *w-*. Indeed, if both predicates depend on the same subject (viz. the author or authors of the text) and govern the same direct object (which is at the same time their antecedent substantive),¹⁸ the use of *q-* or *hl* before *s'brt* would be superfluous and seems very surprising. On the other hand, if the subject of this verb is the god Athtar , we are dealing with two different relative clauses, each having its proper subject. In that case the relative pronoun put before the second of them allows one to make a definite distinction between these clauses.¹⁹ With due regard to the new interpretation of *s'brt* proposed here, the whole formula is to be translated as "thanks to the offering(s) he (they) granted to Him (i.e. to Athtar dhū Qabḍ) that He accepted" or, "thanks to the taxes (and offerings) he (they) granted to Him that He accepted".

However, in quite different contexts attested in the Minaic inscriptions that originate mostly in the oasis of al-^cUlā (ancient Dedan),²⁰ this verb has another meaning

Main sigla of inscription	Contexts containing the formula with <i>krb</i> and <i>s'br</i>	Number of offerings and taxes (sing. <i>krb</i> or pl. <i>'krb</i> , <i>kbwdt</i>)	Form of relative pronoun (sing. <i>ḏ</i> - or pl. <i>'hl</i>)
Ma'in 5 = M 400	<i>b-krb/krb-s'ḏ-s'br</i>	sing.	sing.
Bauer 6 = RÉŠ 2970 + 2971 + 2971bis β + 2971bis α = M 190 + 191 + 193 + 192/2	<i>[w-]b'krb[/]krb-s'hl/s'br</i>	pl.	pl.
Ma'in 7 = RÉŠ 2771 = M 27/3	<i>b-kbwdt/krb^kmyḏ^kTTR/ḏ-QBD^hhl/s'br</i>	pl.	pl.
RÉŠ 3022 = M 247/1–2	<i>b-kbwdt/w-'krb/krb^kT TR/ḏ-QBD-m^hhl/s'br</i>	pl.	pl.

FIGURE 3. The forms of relative pronouns before *s'br* in the formula with *krb* and *s'br*.

describing an action performed by a dedicant: "to consecrate" (Beeston 1971 [1972]: 53–54). It is not strange at all, since *abarra* in Arabic is also not necessarily connected with God and can designate some actions of human beings: *abarra-'l-qawla* "he executed, or performed, the saying ... truly", *abarra 'alā ḥaṣmi-hi* "he overcame his adversary", etc. (Lane 1863–1893, 1: 175–176).

The problem of this figurine's provenance remains to be resolved. However, all the other Minaic inscriptions in which the proper noun *TRT* is mentioned, viz. two published (as-Sawdā' 30 = RÉŠ 2886/3; as-Sawdā' 37 = RÉŠ 3306 A/7–8)²¹, and one unpublished (SW-BA 7; cf. Bron 1998a: 79), originate in Nashshān. Thus it seems possible to attribute LuBM 2 with a certain hesitation to the ancient city of al-Jawf.

This short inscription demonstrates once more the urgent necessity to take into account all the available contexts before making any philological or historical reconstruction in South Arabian studies, as well as to search for unpublished inscriptions not only in the territory of the Arabian Peninsula, but also in the galleries and storerooms of world-famous museums.

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Notes

- ¹ Previously known as the South Arabian Landing, this existed from 1976 until 1997; a replacement display was made in Room 51 from 1997 to 2005, but plans are currently underway for a further refurbishment.
- ² The altar has been published under the siglum LuBM 1 (Lundin & Frantsouzzoff 1997): it was temporarily exhibited in the exhibition *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen* held at the British Museum in 2002 (Simpson 2002: 168–169, no. 213), and subsequently loaned to America for exhibitions at the Bowers Museum and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC. The object under consideration here passed through auction in London (Christie's 1972: 52, pl. 10, lot 203), and was subsequently acquired by the British Museum from a Mr S. Tomlinson and registered in the Department of the Ancient Near East as 1975–1–20,1 = 136211. Apart from the sale catalogue, it has only been illustrated once before (Philby 1981: 33).
- ³ It was first published in Russian with a preliminary translation and a short interpretation of the verb *s'br*(t) in Frantsouzzoff 2000: 187–188.
- ⁴ Breton *et al.* 1980: 45, 111, pl. 3 (at the bottom) — photograph 114 — sketch; Akopjan, Bāmakhrama & Vinogradov 1986: 22 (see a drawing on the front cover).
- ⁵ Its best photographs are published in Sedov 2005: pl. 46, with the references to all the publications of this artefact and its inscription.
- ⁶ Good quality photographs are reproduced in de Mai-gret & Robin 1989: 262, 264, 266, pls 1a–c, 2a–c, 3a–c; Bauer & Lundin 1998: figs 245a–g, 246.

- ⁷ Despite numerous attempts to determine more precisely the dating of the Minaeo-Egyptian synchronism and consequently of RÉŠ 3022 (e.g. de Maigret & Robin 1989: 277–278; Gnoli 1996; Lemaire 1996: 44–47), it remains vague and varies between the revolt of Inarus (463–454) and the conquest of Egypt by Artaxerxes III Ochus in 343 BC.
- ⁸ Hamilton 3, classified by G.L. Harding as Hadhramitic, seems to be early Sabaic, although it was found in Shabwa.
- ⁹ However, the verbal stems *hlf* and *thlf* both having the meaning "to swear" occur in Sabaic (Beeston *et al.* 1982: 67). The common nouns from this root have not been attested yet in the other Epigraphic South Arabian (ESA) languages with the only exception of *hlf-m* "guaranteed (by oath ?)" in Hadhramitic (RÉS 2693/3). As to *GZM*, its derivatives are also found in Qatabanic, but with a different sense "to regulate, decide" (Ricks 1989: 37–38).
- ¹⁰ In the last example the expression *gzm* | [*t*]^(c)*mnt/s²ym-hmw/T²LB/RYM-m* is interpreted as "le serment de soumission à leur patron Ta'lab Ri-yâm" (Robin 1985: 309, 312).
- ¹¹ In modern Yemen this plant is also known under the names of *nabaq* and *dūm*. Its fruits are used as forage.
- ¹² Sima 2000: 184–188. It should be noted that until now this tree has been attested to only in Sabaic.
- ¹³ This epithet is examined in detail in Sima 2000: 164–168.
- ¹⁴ The lack of the article or *mī*mation is typical in Minaic grammar.
- ¹⁵ In the commentary to MAFRAY — Darb aṣ-Ṣabī 8 its editors paid attention to the disagreement between the masculine form of [*s³*]*P* (ll. [2]–3) undoubtedly related to the author(s) and the feminine one of [*s³*]*r* (l. 5), but supposed that one of the dedicants was a woman who alone was in charge of the offering (Robin & Ryckmans 1988: 119). It is obvious now that this fragmentary text was dedicated to a goddess whose name remains unknown. The restoration ³*lh*-[*s³*] (l. 3), however, should not necessarily be changed to ³*lh*[*t-s³*], since in Minaic ³*l*, ³*lh* designates not only a god, but also a goddess (Arbach 1993, i: 4).
- ¹⁶ This verb is usually translated as "affecter (à une divinité)", i.e. "to assign, to grant (to a deity)" (Bron 1998b: 43, 46), "s'acquiescer d'une obligation, offrir" (Arbach 1993, i: 53). In Qatabanic this stem is interpreted as "to be granted" (Ricks 1989: 87).
- ¹⁷ Bauer & Lindin 1998: 116; Bron 1998b: 43, 46, 71. Nevertheless on the basis of the same contexts

A.F.L. Beeston supposed "that the relative pronoun *q* or ³*hl* may refer not to the 'offerings' but to the author or authors of the text, namely the 'offerer'" (Beeston 1953: 200). However, this suggestion does not correspond well to Ma'īn 7/3 where only one author is involved in this procedure.

- ¹⁸ The verb *kt**r**b* is doubly transitive: its second direct object is the god ⁴*Athtar*.
- ¹⁹ The first relative clause with *kt**r**b* as its predicate is linked to the antecedent substantive *asyn*detically in complete accordance with the ESA grammatical rules.
- ²⁰ RÉŠ 3344 = M 319/3; RÉŠ 3346 = M 321/1; RÉŠ 3347 = M 322/3; RÉŠ 3357 = M 333/4; RÉŠ 3696 = M 357/4; RÉŠ 3698 = M 359/2; Beeston 85 = M 464/4; Beeston 86 = M 465/4; etc. See also RÉŠ 3603 = M 351/8 from Madā'īn Ṣāliḥ (ancient Hegra) and Kamna 8 = RÉŠ 2844 = M 96/5 from ancient Kaminahū.
- ²¹ In the second context only the month *q*-²*TRT* is attested.

Sigla

Bauer 6	Inscription in Bauer & Lindin 1998: 115–116, 132, table 2.
Beeston 85, 86	Inscriptions in Beeston 1971 [1972: 52–54, pl. 24].
CIH	Inscriptions in <i>Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum</i> . Pars IV. <i>Inscriptiones Himyariticas et Sabaicas continens</i> . Paris: Reipublicae Typographeo, 1889–1932.
Fa	Inscriptions in Fakhry 1952.
G1 1388	Inscription in Tschinkowitz 1969: 14–15.
Hamilton 3	Inscription in Brown & Beeston 1954; Pirenne 1990: 48–49, pl. 44d.
Ja 2494d	Inscription in Jamme 1972: 101.
Kamna	Inscriptions in Robin 1992: 169–194, pls 45b–57a.
M	Inscriptions in Garbini 1974.
MAFRAY — al- ^c Adan 10 + 11 + 12	Inscription in Robin 1985: 308–315, pl. 4.
MAFRAY — Darb aṣ-Ṣabī 3, 8	Inscriptions in Robin & Ryckmans 1988: 111–112, 118–119, 147, 149, pls 3a–b, 5a.
Ma'īn	Inscriptions in Bron 1998b: 37–121, pls 4–75.
Rb	Inscriptions from Raybūn.

RÉS	Inscriptions in <i>Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique</i> . v–viii. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1929–1968.	208, tables 9–42. Registration numbers of objects discovered at Raybūn by the SOYCE.
as-Sawdāʾ	Inscriptions in Avanzini 1995: 81–	

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