Nabataeans or Ituraeans in Mount Lebanon?  
About the Aramaic inscription of Yanouḥ  

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Abstract

This article presents the Aramaic inscription found in Yanouḥ, high mountains of Byblos – Lebanon, in the year sixties of the last century. I try to highlight the cultural influence of the Nabataeans who extended to Hauran and around Damascus during the Greco-Roman period. The article treat various questions: How does one explain the unique presence of this inscription in Mount Lebanon? What was the cultural and political influence of the Nabataeans towards north-west Syria? Has this inscription been written by Nabataeans, or by other populations: Did the Ituraeans use or adopt their writing system?

Keywords: Nabataeans, Ituraeans, Mount Lebanon, Yanouḥ, Petra, Aramaic inscription, Palmyrene, Syriac, Greco-Roman period.

Introduction

The Aramaic inscription on a sandstone block, the topic of my paper, was found in Yanouḥ in the highlands of Byblos during excavations in the sixties of the last century and was published twice.\(^2\) This block was reused and inserted into a wall located between the main nave and the southern lateral nave of the so-called Basilica of Yanouḥ (Fig.1), and was probably cut, with result that parts of the inscription are missing. Its estimated measurements, according to the publishers, are: 75-78 cm. wide, 38-40 cm. high and 40 cm thick.\(^3\) This block is nowhere to be found, and the publishers worked only on photos from the archives conserved in the Direction Générale des Antiquités du Liban (Figs.2 and 3). The inscription is fragmentary and composed of two lines. The publishers give the following reading (Fig.4):

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?\] ŠNT 203 L’NT[…
?\] ZY BNW BYT ‘LH’ [?

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\(^2\) First in Briquel Chatonnet – Bordreuil, 2001; then in Briquel Chatonnet, 2005.

\(^3\) For the discovery and description of this stone with the inscription, see Briquel Chatonnet – Bordreuil, 2001, p. 148; Briquel Chatonnet, 2005, p. 1-4.
“The year 203 of ’NT[...? 
Who built the house of the god”…
Paleographic remarks:

In spite of their recognizing of the general Nabataean ductus of the script, the publishers have the tendency to compare the letters of this inscription to the Qumranian, Palmyrian and Edessan-Syriac letters, especially when some letter-forms are unknown in the Nabataean inscriptions.

The form of the aleph is similar to that of Palmyra, Qumran and Edessa. This form is clearly different from the Nabataean aleph, though we can find the
general schema close to this letter in the inscription of Ašlah (Fig. 5),\textsuperscript{4} from 95 B.C. It is, however, more similar to the other languages, though is not quite the same.

The bet is similar to the Nabataean bet and to a form found in the inscriptions from Si' (Fig. 6).\textsuperscript{5}

The form of the he is similar to that of the Persian period but with a more rounded ductus as in Edessan inscriptions\textsuperscript{6}; but also this form is found in the earlier and monumental Nabataean with a more rounded ductus (Fig. 12).\textsuperscript{7}

The waw and zayn present a typical Nabataean ductus.

The yod is similar to the Palmyrian one; but we also find such a form in Nabataean: as in the Elusa inscription (first half of the second century B.C., Fig. 7)\textsuperscript{8} and in the cursive Nabataean; in the inscription of Summāqiyyāt in Hauran (Fig. 8), we find the yod without an upper stroke\textsuperscript{9}. This letter is open on the left, as in the El-Mal inscription (fig. 13), from east of Qoneitra in the Golan (7/6 B.C.)\textsuperscript{10}. In the bilingual inscription from Si' we find the two forms: one with upper stroke, and other with a sharp angle (Fig. 6).\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Ašlah Inscription from Petra: 95 BCE}
\caption{Ašlah inscription. (Dalman 1912, n. 90)}
\end{figure}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{4}] Dalman, n. 90; Cantineau II, n. 2.
\item[\textsuperscript{5}] Milik, 2003, Pl. 180.
\item[\textsuperscript{6}] Briquel Chatonnet – Bordreuil, 2001, p. 148.
\item[\textsuperscript{7}] Naveh, 1987: see the comparative table of alphabets, p. 137.
\item[\textsuperscript{8}] Naveh, 1987, p. 154.
\item[\textsuperscript{9}] Nehmè, 2010b, p. 459.
\item[\textsuperscript{10}] Naveh, 1975, p.117-23.
\item[\textsuperscript{11}] Milik, 2003, Pl. 180.
\end{itemize}
Figure 6 Si’ inscriptions. Milik 2003, Pl. 180

Inscription from Ḥalaša: ca. 168 BCE

Figure 7 Elusa inscription. (Naveh, 1987, p. 154)
The *lamed*, with a double bend, and the *nun* are near to the Nabataean and Qumranian forms.

The *shin* is similar to that in the Edessan inscriptions (Fig.9-10)\(^{12}\), but it is like the earlier Nabataean form\(^{13}\); parallels are found also in El-Mal and Si‘.

The form of the *taw* in the first line, with a loop, is similar to the Edessan inscriptions (Fig.9-10)\(^{14}\) but not to the monumental or cursive Nabataean script. The form - in the second line - is classical Nabataean. We may find different forms of this letter in the Nabataean inscriptions even in the same inscription: two *taw* on two graffiti in Sinai from Wadi Mukattab (graffiti of three emperors, Fig.11) which date back to 211 or 205 AD\(^{15}\) (*CIS* II, 963 = RES 128) and (*CIS* II, 964) dated back to 189/90 AD. The scribe of Yanouḥ inscription carves differently the final *taw* in the first line (ŠNT) and in the second line (BYT).

Consequently, Briquel Chatonnet and Bordreuil sum up: we are faced with a different form of Aramaic writing, derived from the standard writing from the Achaemenid period, which is not directly related to any of the branches known to

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\(^{12}\) Briquel Chatonnet – Bordreuil, 2001, p. 149.

\(^{13}\) See for example the inscription of Aslah and that from Kerak (Milik, 1958-59, p. 331-334; also Naveh, 1987, the comparative table of alphabets, p. 137.

\(^{14}\) Briquel Chatonnet – Bordreuil, 2001, p. 149.

\(^{15}\) Nehmé, 2010a, tabl. p. 65 and pp. 68-69, fig. 23.
the Levant in the Hellenistic and Roman period. The general look of the script, its ductus, is close to that of Nabataean\textsuperscript{16} in spite of the difference of some letters. This Aramaic writing is therefore a development, like others, of the Hellenistic period according to the publishers.

\textbf{Figure 10} Amassamses inscription. (Pognon 1907, Pl. xxvi, n. 57)

\textbf{Figure 11} Wadi Mukattab graffiti. (Nehmé, 2010a, 68)

\textsuperscript{16} Briquel Chatonnet – Bordreuil, 2001, p. 149.
In my opinion, the writing of this inscription is a direct development from the Nabataean script, like in inscriptions from Si‘, El-Mal and others, adopted and developed by a local population installed near, or in connection, to Hauran and Golan populations, north of the Nabataean kingdom. What was this population? What was its language? The second line begins with a relative zy “who, which”, whose antecedent should be before it in the same line or the end of the first line. The formula: ZY BNW BYT ’LH’ “who built the house of the god” (fig.13) is
curiously similar to El-Mal (7/6 B.C.): BNH BYT ’LH “he built the house of god”, the word for “god” being an absolute or undetermined form; ’LH could be the name of the deity\textsuperscript{17}. Probably the divinity of Yanouḥ belonged to a similar religious community.

The presence of an Aramaic inscription in Mont Lebanon allows us to think of the Ituraeans. The Ituraeans\textsuperscript{18} constituted a political entity in the Beqa’ Valley, probably from the time of Alexander of Macedonia who was forced to leave his siege-operations at Tyre in order to strike east into the mountains of Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon to suppress recalcitrant Arab tribesmen.\textsuperscript{19} They appeared in the first century BC onwards under the direction of Ptolemy son of Mennaeus\textsuperscript{20}. They dominated both mountain ranges of Anti-Lebanon and Lebanon, conquered Arqa and Botrys and threatened Byblos, which was protected by Pompey. Strabo names two populations: the Ituraeans and Arabians, all of whom are freebooters who occupied the whole of the mountainous tracts\textsuperscript{21}. If the Ituraeans can threaten Byblos it means that they were in its highlands or borders.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig13.png}
\caption{El-Mal inscription. (Naveh, 1975, p. 117)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{17} Naveh, 1975, p. 120.
\textsuperscript{18} For the Ituraean identity see, Aliquot, pp. 166-170.
\textsuperscript{19} Wright, 2013, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{20} Schürer, 1973, pp. 561-574.
\textsuperscript{21} Strabo, 16.2.18.
The Ituraean tetrarchies:

According to Wright\textsuperscript{22} the Ituraean heartland was divided into tetrarchies, but their boundaries are less certain (Fig. 14). The principal tetrarchy formed a powerful state with an administrative capital at Chalkis below Libanos or Anjar and a religious center at Heliopolis-Baalbek\textsuperscript{23}. The tetrarchy of Abilene occupied the eastern slopes of Anti-Lebanon, centered on Abila (Suk Wadi Barada). A northern Ituraean tetrarchy also existed, with a capital at Herakleia-Arka (Tell ‘Arqā). South of Chalkis, a branch of the Ituraean population occupied the territory around the Sea of Galilee which may have formed a fourth tetrarchy. We find such a division in the New Testament. Luke 3:1 states the following: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene...”. Thus, Yanouḥ in the highlands of Byblos can belong to the Chalkis tetrarchy and the finding of such inscription there reveals the presence of an Ituraean population. The Ituraeans are possibly the descendants of the aramaeans in the Beqa’, perhaps of the kingdom of Ṣobah.\textsuperscript{24}

If the boundaries of the Ituraean tetrarchies stretch from Lebanon and Anti-Libanon to Damascus, Hauran, Golan and Galilea, then their language should be an Aramaic dialect like their neighbors. This language, with its script, is a development of the Nabataean one. The Nabataean occupation spread north during the Seleucid and Roman periods: from Bosra, Idraa, Si’, Hauran, Golan and other territories up to Damascus and its surroundings\textsuperscript{25} as in Dmeir, northeast of Damascus, located in the Qalamun in Anti-Libanon. The influence of this occupation is well known especially in the manner of writing: the use of the Nabataean letters even the language, despite the fact that the populations were not Nabataean.

If the ductus of the inscription of Yanouḥ is close to that of Nabataean, we can propose that it is a developed script, like others, in the north of the Nabataean kingdom based in Petra. So the script is similar to, though not identical with, the Nabataean script.

Dating the inscription:

If Yanouḥ is in Ituraean territory, and the inscription is Aramaic and its script is developed from Nabataean on one side, on the other side we see a similarity with early Syriac inscriptions, from the first and second centuries AD. Thus, the date should be examined in light of this perspective.

The date in the inscription is written with a system of writing figures similar to that of Palmyra and Edessa, which differs from that used in Nabataean and

\textsuperscript{22} Wright, 2013, pp. 56-58. About the Ituraeans in the Roman period, see also, Myers, 2010.

\textsuperscript{23} Chalkis can be located, according to Abou Diwan, 2018, on one of the areas overlooked the Wadi Yahfüfa, p. 27.

\textsuperscript{24} Niehr, 2014, pp. 334-335. For the Aramaic kingdom of Ṣobah in the Beqa’ region, see Abousamra 2019.

\textsuperscript{25} Starcky, 1985, pp. 168-169; see also Tholbecq, 2007, p. 301.
Hauran inscriptions.\textsuperscript{26} The date formula appears to be: BYRH X ŠNT Y… “in the month X, the year Y”.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure14.png}
\caption{Ituraean tetrarchies, (Wright 2013, Pl. 14)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{26} Briquel Chatonnet – Bordreuil, 2001, p. 149.
L’NT: according the image of the archives of the DGA\(^{27}\) (published by Briquel Chatonnet –Bordreuil, 2001; Briquel Chatonnet, 2005), we can see, after L’NT, remains of an engraved curve letter that similar to the head of the letter yod in the second line. Probably we can suggest to read L’NT<Y>[K/S]? “of Antioch/us”? If the date is based on the Antiochan era beginning in 49 B.C., the inscription would be from 153-154 A.D.; if from the Actium era it would date to 172-173. In spite of hesitations, the publishers opt for the Seleucid era as a probable date (110/109 B.C). The most compelling argument in favor of such date of the second century B.C., according the publishers, is the fact that this inscription was engraved in sandstone. It was found in a reused archaeological context but we may draw, they continue, a hypothesis about the original location of the inscription. The only building excavated in Yanouḥ that was made of sandstone was probably a temple, and it was surely erected in the Hellenistic period. All the buildings built in the Roman period, which are the majority at the site, are built of limestone. This means that our inscription was probably carved originally in the Hellenistic period and that this temple goes back to the second century B.C.\(^{28}\)

Briquel Chatonnet eliminates the Antioch era for orthographic and administrative reasons: the taw of “Antioch” would be transcribed by ṭet and the Antioch era was never used outside of the province of Antioch.\(^{29}\) She recognizes that the script isn’t similar to other inscriptions of the Seleucid period\(^{30}\) and leaves the topic of L’NT as an open debate without providing a solution. Probably the use of taw (error for ṭet?) and the Antioch era are exception in the inscription of Yanouḥ!? We don’t know any other Aramaic/Syriac inscription dated according this era, even in Antioch area!

If we take a general look at the Semitic inscriptions we find the following formula several times: BYRH X ŠNT Y L PN. The lamed precedes the personal name: “in the month X, the year Y, of PN”. We can find some examples in late Phoenician and Nabataean inscriptions: ŠNT 180 L’DN MLKM 143 ŠNT L’M ŠR “In the year 180 of the lord of kings, which is the year 143 of Tyrian people” (KAI 18, 4-6. See also KAI 19). In the Nabataean inscriptions we also have this formula: BYRH X ŠNT Y LHRTT… “In the month of, the year of Hartath...”, LQLWDYS QYSR… “of Claudius Caesar”… as well as the well-known formula: BYRH X… ŠNT Y… L’LKSNDRS “In the month of… the year… of Alexander”.

Probably the date of our inscription can be restored according to this formula: [BYRH X?] ŠNT 203 L’NT<Y>[K/S] “The year 203 of Antio[ch/us]”. Till now we don’t know any other era begin with such name: L’NT<Y>. The dating systems used in the Greco-Roman period are: Alexandre, Greek, Seleucid, Roman emperor, Pompeo (Byblos)… The reading L’NT<Y> is almost clear and

\(^{27}\) The Directorate General of Antiquities of Lebanon


\(^{29}\) Briquel Chatonnet, 2005, p. 5.

\(^{30}\) Briquel Chatonnet, 2005, p. 7.
the restoration L’NT<Y>[K/S]? “of Antioch/us” seems plausible. If the restoration of the date is accepted, our inscription can be dated to the year 153-154 A.D. This date would fit the development of the Nabataean script in the Ituraean area, on one hand, and the earlier Syriac inscriptions on the other hand.

When we are confronted with a unique and fragmentary Aramaic inscription from Mount Lebanon, we cannot decide the era and other interpretations for lack of parallels. There is a possibility to draw another hypothesis about the era: on the one hand, the date of the Yanouḥ inscription is written with a system of writing similar to that of Palmyra and Edessa (in the region of Antioch), which differs from that used in Nabataean and Hauran inscriptions. On the other hand it has similarities with Palmyrene and earlier Syriac inscriptions. Thus, according to these two factors, we can suggest that the Aramaic community installed on the Ituraean territory in Yanouḥ was, most likely, a nomadic tribe which had emigrated from the interior of Syria31 and brought with it such paleographic influence and the Antiochian era.

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Anabat Am Iteviron in Jib Libnan?…

Gaby Abousamra

Summary

The study of the Aramaic inscription found in Jib Libnan, in the northern city of Jib Libnan, in the last years of the Iron Age, presents an attempt to understand its cultural, religious, and political impact on the inhabitants of the area. The inscription is a rare find in the Levant, and it is a unique example of how the Aramaic language was used in the region.

Keywords: Anabat, Iteviron, Jib Libnan, Aramaic, Syrian, Iron Age, Greek.
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