A First Syriac Inscription from the Area of Ḥimā (Najrān Province, Southern Saudi Arabia)

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Abstract: This study publishes the first Syriac inscription ever found in the desert area of Ḥimā, in southern Saudi Arabia. The three-line text, which is paleographically dated between the 6th and 7th century AD begins with the classic Syriac liturgical prayer, followed by an invocation rather resembling those found in the graffiti throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Its author could be a Christian traveller or a local belonging to the Christian community of Najrān. In either case, the inscription is historically relevant, as it testifies that the Christian culture in the Najrān area was, at least partially, in Syriac.

The article also includes the study of the Ancient South Arabian and Thamudic graffiti engraved on the rock panel around the Syriac inscription.

Keywords: Syriac, Thamudic Himaitic, epigraphy, Arabian Christianism

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Text

1. *Introduction*

The Syriac inscription which is the subject of this publication was discovered in 2020 by the Saudi-French Archaeological and Epigraphic Mission to Najrān (MAFSN) in the desert region of Ḥimā, located some 100 Km north of Najrān (fig. 1). The MAFSN has conducted regular epigraphic survey campaigns in the area since 2007, which brought to the discovery of a number of texts of significant importance for the history pre-Islamic Arabia,[1] and to the collection of an archive that counts more than 16.000 texts, predominantly written in the Ancient South Arabian (ASA) script and in the southern variety of the Thamudic script used locally and called for that reason Himaitic (HIM).[2] Many other graffiti belong to different chronological stages of Arabic script and language. At Ḥimā, other external writing traditions are also more rarely attested, especially the Nabataean and Greek one. This, however, is the first time a text in Syriac is found in the area.

The panel with the Syriac inscription was discovered and registered in January 21st. It lies on an isolated bolder located 200 meters south-east of Jabal Kawkab's southern side (figs. 2, 3), in an area that is named by locals Malāzim Ḥāba (HAB).

[1] Robin et al. 2014.

[2] Robin & Gorea 2016; Prioletta 2018.

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The main goal of the 2020 campaign was in fact to complete the exploration of the southern edge of this enormous mountain covering 115 km^2 and being the most northern end of the Ḥimā area, which opens to the great Arabian desert. Earlier surveys in this area were done in the early 2000's by a Japanese team and in 2008-2010 by the MAFSN team, which worked in the eastern tip of the mountain and mapped the zones of Khushayba and ʿĀn Halkān.[3] The MAFSN 2020's survey lasted 12 days, during which almost the entire area could be mapped and 556 different rock panels were pinpointed and their GPS coordinates captured.[4]

2. *The Syriac inscription (George Kiraz & Françoise Briquel Chatonnet)*

2a. Text transcription and translation (figs. 4–5)

1 ܚܢ ܪܚܡܗ ܡܪܝ ܠܝ / *mrn ʾtrḥm ʿly*
2 ܡܢ ܕܥܒܪ ܒܗ ܕܪܟܐ ܗܕܐ ܟܠ / *kl mn dʿbr bʾwrḥʾ*
3 ܢܫܠ ܒܥܕܝ ܗܕ / *hdʾ nṣlʾ ʿly*

1 Lord have mercy upon me
2 whoever passes through this road
3 let him pray for me

2b. Textual remarks

The content of the inscription is unusual in the Syriac epigraphic corpus, as it is not related to a burial or to the dedication or restoration of a building or of a holy place. Its genre is that of the graffiti, but these generally carry a proper name and are often limited to that.

The text consists of two sentences: line 1 and lines 2–3. Both are formulaic. The first typically appears as scribbles in the front and back matter of manuscripts. The first formula of the text is a very basic liturgical one, which is pronounced at the beginning of the office of all hours in the Syriac monastic liturgy and would be pronounced in every prayer.

The style, syntax and word choices of the second sentence very much resembles phraseology found in manuscript colophons where the scribes ask anyone (ܟܠ ܡܢ *kl mn*) who reads (ܕܩܪܐ *dqrʾ* "who reads", instead of our *dʿbr* "who passes

[3] Kawatoko et al. 2005.

[4] The teams of the 2020's campaign was made of Alessia Prioletta (CNRS-UMR 8167, head of the team, epigraphist), Jérôme-François Haquet (CNRS-UMR 8167, archaeologist), Abdullah al-Hatlani (University of Leiden, epigraphist), Yamandù Hilbert (CSIC IMF Archaeology of Social Dynamics of Barcelona, archaeologist), Léa Legouix (EPHE, art historian) and Silvia Lischi (University of Pisa, archaeologist). Two colleagues from the Saudi Heritage Commission (SHC), Ibrahim al-Noami and Muhammad al-Hagawi, joined the team for the first week. The organization of the campaign was under the responsibility of Saleh al-Murih (former director of the SHC branch of Najrān).

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through") the book should pray (ܢܫܠ ܠܝ ܟܠ *nṣlʾ ʿly*) for the scribe.[5] This exact phrase, ܟܠ ܡܢ ܕܩܪ ܢܫܠ ܠܝ ܟܠ *kl mn dqrʿ nṣlʾ ʿly*, is found in British Library (BL) Add.14,542 (dated 509) and BL Add. 14,564 (6th or 7th century)[6] and in the inscription in the mosaic of Nabgha with beneficiaries in plural[7]. In all instances – i.e. the manuscript colophons, the Nabgha inscription and the above one – the first verb is in the active participle while the second (ܢܫܠ ܠܝ *nṣlʾ*) is in the imperfect.

2c. Palaeographic analysis and dating

This inscription bears no date and the support on which it is engraved does not give any clue. We have therefore to rely only on the palaeographic analysis of its script. However, this does not have real parallels in epigraphy, but can rather be compared with manuscripts. This may be easily explained: while some manuscripts (at least biblical and liturgical) were certainly brought to South Arabia for the sake of believers whose liturgy was in Syriac, there were no epigraphic models coming from the core of Syriac world, and engravers were local. They could thus only use the models that were available to them.

The script is basically in the Esṭrangelā form, but with some letters bearing influence of everyday script, of which the oldest attestations are in the parchments of the Middle Euphrates.[8] This intermediary script, which is characterized inter alia by *alaph* with a very long vertical stroke but keeping at the base their traditional form, and by closed loops in *he*, *waw* and *mim* has been called "Esṭrangelā semi-cursif" by one of the authors of this article[9] or "monumentale semi-courante" by Ayda Kaplan, who studied particularly this phenomenon.[10] It is already attested in manuscripts in the 6th century (ms Vat. Sir 137, 564 AD; and colophons as in BL Add. 14,542, f. 94r, AD 509) and developed through the 7th to 9th century.

What follows is a commentary on the ductus of some glyphs in the hope of placing a date range with comparisons with the manuscripts. Given the nature of

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5 In fact, such an anonymous text carved on rock is unusual, if one thinks that the thousands of graffiti in Aramaic, ancient North Arabian or Arabic scripts found in the Syro-Arabian desert, and which witness the widespread diffusion of a certain form of literacy among the nomadic people, are generally signatures or the request to remember this or that person. This anonymous text is rather to be compared to self-depreciation formulas in colophons, written to show the copyist's modesty.

6 The search utilized the digital version of Wright's catalogue currently in preparation by Syriaca.org. The Syriac texts were transcribed by Robert Aydin and are available in the public domain through an online repository: https://github.com/srophe/wright-catalogue.

7 Briquel Chatonnet & Desreumaux 2011.

8 Drivers & Healey 1999: 231–248.

9 Briquel Chatonnet 1997.

10 Kaplan 2019.

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the medium, letters of tiny strokes (e.g. *y n ḥ*) cannot be relied upon for comparison. We shall limit the commentary to five graphs ʾ, *m* (with two allographs, initial and final), *ṣ*, and *r*. These graphs have multiple components in their anatomy that permit comparisons.

The comparison is made against dated manuscripts using the DASH portal.[11] One, however, needs to keep in mind the difference in media and the fact that inscriptions are typically written in a hand that is far less formal than manuscript hand. The Dura parchment P1, dated A.D. 243, was also considered, despite the fact that it is too early, because of its informal hand.[12]

ʾ appears a few times, but it is most clear in *ʾtrḥm* (ln 1). All instances seem to reflect an informal form hardly found in MSS, a midway between Eṣtrangelā ܪ and Sertā ܪ: It is basically the upper stroke of Eṣtrangelā ܪ but without much lower body tilted like a Sertā ܪ. The stroke is at about 45 degrees and quite tall. While such length is at times found in formal hands, it rarely shows up; e.g. in BL Add. 17,110 (dated 599/600, throughout) and BL Add. 14,472 (dated 624, throughout). There is some sort of a resemblance to at least one instance in P1 (e.g. ln 2).

Initial-*m* is found in ܡܪܢ mrn (ln1) and ܡܚ (ln 2) of our inscription. The ductus is not exact. The former has a Sertā-like ܡ with round body, while the latter has an Eṣtrangelā -like angular body with the upper tip pointing to the top. It actually resembles a ܡ with an upper stroke from the top-left corner moving up at ca. 110–degree angle. The rounded case is attested in manuscripts of the seventh through the ninth century.[13] There are no cases of the angular graph in DASH.

Final-*m* in ܐܬܪܚܡ ʾtrḥm (ln 1) is Sertā-like ܡ with the upper stroke clearly clubbed. Such a final-m does not appear in MSS until the beginning of the second millennium (BL Add. 14,734, dated 1085). P1 has one instance of final-m (which in fact resembles its own ܡ, ܒܫܡ ln 14); it is, however, rounder than the m found in our inscription.

The *ṣ* has a ܨ tick on the upper-right portion, with another tick before the stroke goes down. The two lines of the descender are straight in shape, as opposed to a curvy line. The two ticks appear in early MSS frequently (e.g. NL Russia Syr. NS 1, dated 462). It is extremely rare to find a straight horizontal line of the descender in formal hand. But such instances do exist. Such features appear, for instance, in BL Add. 17,181 (dated 512), BL Add. 12,158 (dated 587/8), and BL Add. 17,134 (dated 674/5).

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[11] Digital Analysis of Syriac Handwriting (Michael Penn, Principle Investigator), dash.stanford.edu.

[12] Healey 2000; Briquel Chatonnet 2000.

[13] BL Add. 17,110 (dated 599/600), BL Add. 14,548 (790), BL Ad. 14,582 (816), BL Add. 14,623 (822/3), BL Add. 14,651 (850), BL Add. 14,580 (866), BL Add. 14,650 (874/5), BL Add. 17,130 (876/7), BL Add. 14,668 f. 46 (887/8).

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The right-joining *r* is Sertā-like ܪ (but not the expected Sertā ܪ). While there are such occurrences in MSS of the mid-late fifth century (e.g. BL Add. 14,425 ff. 1–115, dated 463/4), a better circular resemblance begins to appear more clearly in sixth–eighth century MSS.[14] The *r* of *bʾwrḥʾ* (ln 2), however, is Esṭrangelā -like ܪ. It is attested in the earliest of MSS from the fifth century.

The *t* is clearly Esṭrangelā -like with an open body ܬ on the lower-left portion. It is attested in the earliest dated manuscripts (e.g. BL Add. 12,151, 411/2).

To sum up, given the very traditional form of the *kaph* and *taw*, and the fact that, though an informal script, it keeps some Esṭrangelā forms, it seems to us that we can propose a time range between the beginning of the 6th century and the end of the 7th AD[15].

2d. Conclusions

The discovery of this inscription is particularly important. One cannot exclude that it was made by a traveller, which anyway would indicate relations with the core of the Syriac World. If we admit this graffito as written by someone local, it provides confirmation that the Christian culture in South Arabia was at least in part in Syriac. This is not surprising, if one remembers that according to the earliest historical sources, the arrival of Christianity to the Arabian Peninsula needs to be connected with the existence of an established trade activity with al-Ḥirā and Mesopotamia, the cradle of the Syrian-Eastern Church. Moreover, the texts relating the martyrdom of the Christians of Najrān also give evidence that at the beginning of the 6th century there were exchanges between Najrān and the Miaphysite communities of Northern Syria.[16]

The liturgical formulary and the presence of a script generally used for manuscripts imply that liturgy, within at least some communities around Najrān, took place in Syriac. This epigraphic testimony from the area of Ḥimā, now completed by at least a second more recent inscription,[17] provides tangible proof of the use of Syriac by the Christian community of the Najrān region, well after the refoundation of Christianity in this region by the Ethiopian kingdom following the reconquest of the region after the persecution by the Jewish Ḥimyarite king Joseph (Yūsuf Asʾar Yathʾar) around 525.[18]

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14 Vat. Sir. 137 (dated 564), BL Add. 17,134 (674/5), BL Add. 14,448 (699/700), with many other occurrences in eighth, century MSS.

15 See Penn & Jordan Crouser & Abbot 2020 about attestations of cursive script as early as the beginning of the 6th century.

16 Beaucamp & Briquel Chatonnet & Robin 2000; 2010.

17 Abd Allāh Āl Qirād & Briquel Chatonnet & Desreumaux & Robin, in press. A photograph of this inscription was diffused on social media.

18 Robin 2015.

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3. Transcription and commentary of the Ancient South Arabian and Himaitic graffiti found on the panel of the Syriac inscription (Alessia Prioletta)

The panel which bears the Syriac inscription is heavily weathered out in the central upper part, where one recognizes the traces of animal's drawings, such as a camel and a mounted horse. Other drawings include armed human figures with raised hands and ibexes, as well as other camels and mounted horses in various parts of the panel. A modern Arabic inscription is also visible at the panel left end.

The reading is given from top to bottom and right to left. The texts bear the siglum HAB01.26 followed by the successive number.

Group 1 (Right half of the panel, figs. 5, 6)

1 *tymlt*	2 *mhʾmr*	3 *ts²ḥ ḫlṣ*	4 *bln*
5 *ys¹m*	6 *ʿbd.*	7 *ḥtt*	8 *nmr*
9 *lṯw (*or *nṯw)*	10 *ḥmyt ….*	11 Syriac text	12 *ʿlhn ddʾl*
13 *.ʾmm*	14 *s²gg* (or *s²gb*) *yqr*		

Group 2 (Left half of the panel, figs. 6, 7)

15 *mtʿm*	16 *rbʿn ….*	17 *s²hrm wdd ḥrm*	18 *ʿnr q.*
19 *ʾws¹h dd-ḥrt*	20 *mrn* (or *nrm*)	21 *ʾws¹h-bn-ʿkrm.*	22 *ʿlġb* (?)
23 *s²wf..*	24 *myfʿ yqr*	25 *ʿly*	26 *ṯwrm ḥywt*
27 *ḥywt ḏ-ḥs²gm*			

The graffiti carved on this panel accompanying the Syriac inscription nicely represent the kind of scripts that one mostly encounters in the Ḥimā region: nos. 1 and 15 are in fact a mixed text, having the ASA *m* and the HIM *t*; nos. 2, 14 and 23–24 are written in the more curvilinear variety of the HIM script, showing the left-to-right rounded *r*, the rounded *m* (nos. 2 and 24) and a stylized variant of *s²* (nos. 14 and 23), while the no. 3 as well as nos. 4–7 and 9 are in the squared variety[19]. As for the graffiti in the ASA script, interestingly, some of them are in the formal script (nos. 8, 10, 12–13 and 26–27); others, instead, are in the more informal variety of such script, which is typical of texts carved on rock (nos. 17 and 19–21).

Hardly anything can be said on the relative chronology of the texts, as the ductus is quite similar for all of them. The only exception is the ASA text no. 8 (*Nmr*), which is undoubtedly the earliest of the group and is in fact partially superimposed by no. 9. As for the absolute dating, the palaeographic analysis of the ASA texts points to a quite early date for no. 8 (surely before the common era, perhaps around the middle of the 1st millennium BC). The name *Nmr* is especially

[19] The Himaitic script shows at least two, perhaps three different varieties, each of them having some diagnostic glyphs. The publication on the palaeographic study of Himaitic is being prepared by one of the authors of the present article.

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found as a group name in Minaic[20] and it would be tempting to think that this graffito was engraved by one of the several Minaean merchants who stopped at Ḥimā during their trans-Arabian journeys.

Concerning the other ASA texts, no. 10 could have continued on the left side where the panel is eroded or, less likely, might belong to the text below the Syriac inscription (no. 12), and the author could simply have encircled the text with his name. The name *Ḥmyt* is quite commonly attested in the ASA corpus, and therefore bears no useful data. As for text no. 12, the reading of the epithet, *Dd'l*, is made on the basis of the assumption that the last two letters have been written attached to each other as in monograms. The name *ʿlhn*, although especially found as royal epithet, is also more rarely attested as a name of individuals throughout the ASA documentation.

The two texts at the very left end of the rock panel, nos. 26 and 27, reading *Ṯwrm Ḥywt* and *Ḥywt ḏ-Ḥs²gm* respectively, also have a style comparable to that of no. 10. The first one is a juxtaposition of two names, probably the individual and the father's or the group name, while the second mentions the individual and the group name. The fact that the two individual names are mostly found in Sabaic and, especially, that the group name is attested once in a Sabaic text (CIH 570) let us think that the people who left these graffiti might have been of Sabaean origins. Palaeographically, texts no. 10, 26 and 27 appear to be slightly more recent than no. 8, to be dated in the second half of the 1st millennium, to a period corresponding to P. Stein's C1 style.[21]

It is even more difficult to date the texts nos. 17 and 19–21, since the usual palaeographic criteria used for the ASA formal script of monumental inscriptions do not apply to the informal variant of what is found on rock texts. Suffice it to mention the lack of word dividers (nos. 19 and 21), the left-to-right direction of the *r* (nos. 19 and 21) and of the text itself (no. 20), and the "cursive" shape of letters such as the *h* (nos. 17, 19 and 21). Our view is, however, that these texts are contemporary with the formal ones described above, and this could be confirmed by the oversized *w*, which is also seen in the no. 27.

The dating of the HIM texts can only very tentatively be attempted when they appear on a rock panel next to ASA texts, and even then, one should be extremely careful in comparing the ductus and the patina of graffiti carved on a same panel and making chronological hypothesis on the basis of that. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the ductus of the texts nos. 2 and 5, for example, is quite similar to that of the ASA name *ʿlhn Dd'l*, and these graffiti might therefore be more or less contemporary. This also applies for the graffiti found in the left half of the rock panel.

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[20] See the occurrences of this name in the *DASI* database (http://dasi.cnr.it/, accessed 08/02/2022).

[21] Stein 2013.

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The onomasticon of this group of graffiti is also quite exemplary. Among the HIM texts, there are many one-word names, for which regular parallels are found in the other ANA corpora or that are more peculiar (*ʿly*, *Ḥṭt, Ysʿm*, etc.).[22] One text in the mixed script bears a theophoric name, *Tymlt* (no. 1).[23] Many names in both HIM and ASA scripts, such as here *Mtʿm*, *S²hrm* and *Ṯwrm*, show the final -*m* (*mimation*), following a practice which is typical of the ASA onomasticon.[24]

Textual data are quite scanty. However, besides the *yqr* ("he carved") formula in the texts nos. 14 and 24,[25] one should remark that the formula with the *wdd* ("he loved") verb, which is usually typical of HIM texts, appears used here in a text in the ASA script (no. 17).[26]

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[22] The very greatest majority of the Himaitic onomasticon is made of one-word names. It appears indisputable, if one makes an onomastic search in the *OCIANA* database (http://krcfm.orient.ox.ac.uk/fmi/webd#ociana), that most of these names belong to the pre-Islamic Arabian repertory and to the Safaitic one, which is the best represented corpus of this digitised collection.

[23] A surprisingly high percentage of the names found at Ḥimā are composed names with theophoric elements invoking divine names such as ʾĪl, al-Lāh, al-Lāt, al-Ilāh, al-ʿUzzà, Manāt, Yaghūth, Kahl, dhu-Samāwī, ʿAmm, ʿAthtar, Shams and Wadd. These has been studied by Ch. Robin in various articles in preparation.

[24] Generally, but not systematically, the mimated names have parallels in the ASA documentation, while the more "north-Arabian" one-word names bear no final *m*.

[25] On this formula, see Prioletta 2018.

[26] On this use, see Prioletta 2022.

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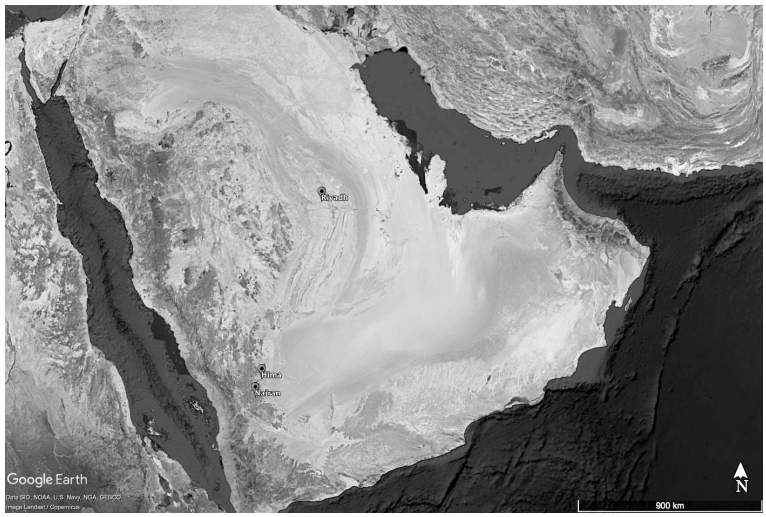


Fig. 1: Map showing the location of Ḥimā (© Google Earth).

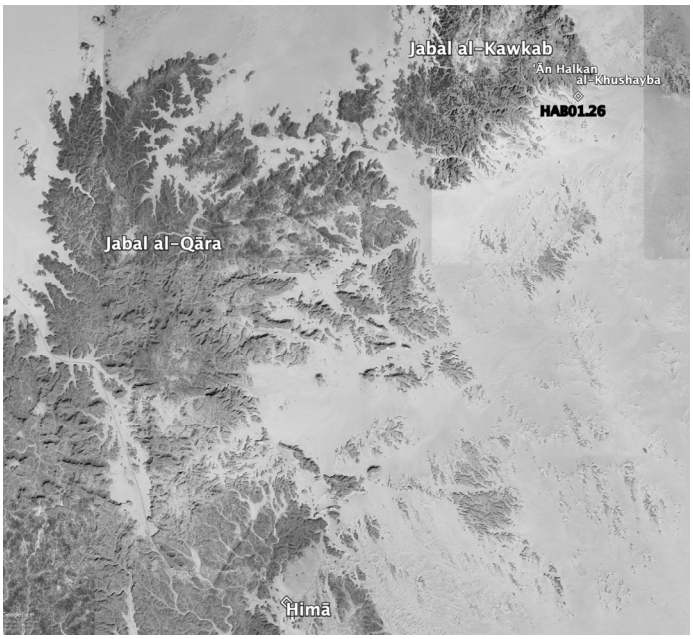


Fig. 2: Map showing the location of the panel HAB01.26 in the Ḥimā area (© Google Earth).

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Fig. 3: Photogrammetric reconstruction of the panel HAB01.26 (© MAFSN).

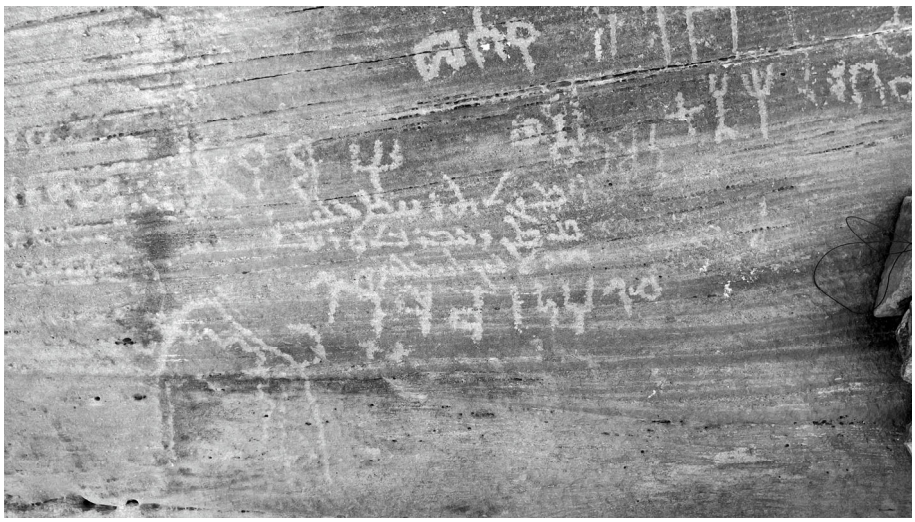


Fig. 4: Close-up photo of the Syriac inscription (© MAFSN).

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Fig. 5: Right end of the panel HAB01.26 (© MAFSN).

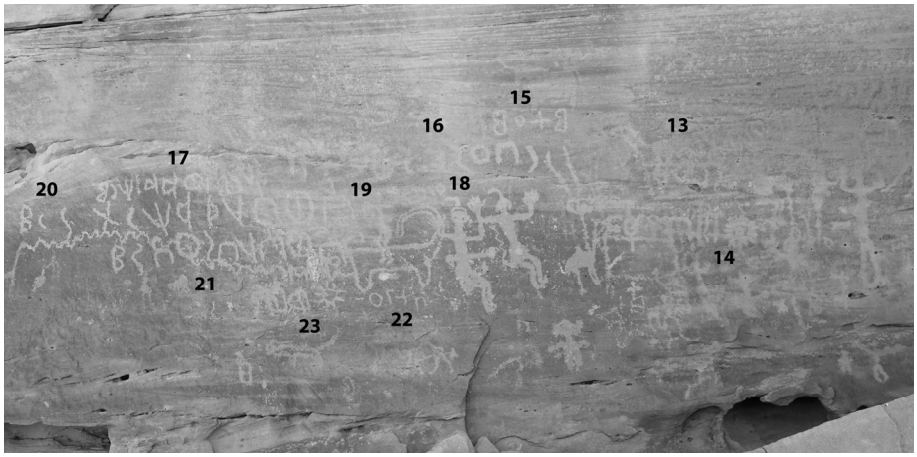


Fig. 6: Central part of the panel HAB01.26 (© MAFSN).

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Fig. 7: Left end of the panel HAB01.26 (© MAFSN).

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