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A NOTE ON THE ’EN ’AVDAT INSCRIPTION

In the latest number of JSS (35, 1990) Professor Bellamy published a short article1 on the ’En ’Avdat inscription claiming that the Arabic part of the inscription is in fact written in verse. Bellamy’s interpretation is, though, open to serious criticism as it is based on several disputable points.

The inscription was published by A. Negev in 19862. It has six lines, two3 of which, ll. 4–5, are in Arabic, others are written in Nabatean Aramaic. In the following, I give a) the transliteration of the Arabic part; b) the reading of Naveh – Shaked and their translation; and c) the reading of Bellamy and his translation.

a)4

1. 4: FYF'L L' FX' WL' TX' FKN HN' YB'N' 'LMWTW L'
1. 5: 'B'H FKN HN' 'XX GXHW L' YXXN'

b)5

1. 4: fa-yaf'alul lâ fidan wa-lâ atharan fa-kâna in6 yabghinâ l-mawtu la
1. 5: abghih7 fa-kâna in arâda ġurhun8 lâ yuridnâ
1. 4: And he acts neither for benefit nor for favour. And if death claim us let me not
1. 5: be claimed. And if affliction seeks, let it not seek us.

c)6

1. 4: fa-yaf'alul lâ fidan (or fidâ) wa-lâ 'atharâ fa-kâna hunâ yabghînâ 'al-mawtû lâ
1. 5: 'abghâhu fa-kâna hunâ 'adâda ġurhun lâ yurîdnâ
1. 4: For (Obodas) works without reward or favour, and he, when death tried to claim us, did not
1. 5: let it claim (us), for when a wound (of ours) festered, he did not let us perish.

2 A. Negev, Obodas the God. Israel Exploration Journal 36 (1986), pp. 56-60. The reading and translation of the inscription was provided by J. Naveh and S. Shaked.
3 But cf. below.
4 The letter X signifies the letter which can be read as either D or R, and which can represent the Arabic phonemes /d/, /dh/ and /r/.
5 Naveh and Shaked give the transliteration only in unvoiced Arabic script (p. 58). Vocalization (according to the rules of Classical grammar) is mine.
6 Naveh and Shaked argue for reading HN' as a conditional particle similar to Classical in.
7 Naveh and Shaked take this as an Aramaic etpe'-el (p. 58), which is a rather fantastic proposition.
8 To be vocalized so, not ġarh as in Naveh - Shaked, p. 58.
9 Bellamy argues against reading KN HN' as a reflex of what would in Classical Arabic be kâna in, and prefers to see in HN' an (otherwise unattested) temporal particle = Classical idhâ (pp. 75-77).
Bellamy's interpretation is, I believe, untenable for the following reasons:

1. The reading of HN' as a temporal particle is arbitrary, and Bellamy does not adduce any evidence for it. In addition, his understanding of KN HN' as "simply a marker of the past" (p. 77) is likewise arbitrary. I cannot quite agree with Bellamy's arguments against reading HN' as a conditional particle; in Classical Arabic, a parenthetical conditional clause embedded within the main clause is quite acceptable\(^{10}\), so it is possible to read: fa-kāna (in yabghinā I-mawtu) lā abghīhi, and: fa-kāna (in arāda? ḡurūn) lā yuridunā, even though in the first phrase kunūt would look better if 'ḆH is a first person verb (see below).

2. Bellamy has to postulate the negation of the perfect with lā instead of mā, a feature in itself possible in early, non-documented Arabic, but still a hypothesis on which one should not lightly build readings, especially as a simpler reading (lā abghīhi) is in hand.

3. Reading 'ḆH as abghāhu (IV) leads Bellamy to speculate on the meaning of the verb (p. 77) and to translate it "let claim". In fact, the fourth stem means in Arabic 'to make somebody do X' (whether voluntarily or not), not 'to let do X' except in a few cases; abghā (a not too common verb in Classical Arabic) means primarily 'to make someone seek' etc.

Points 2. and 3. together render a reading lā abghāhu very improbable. A more natural reading would be lā abghīhi\(^{11}\), to be translated "I do/did not seek it"\(^{12}\). This reading is, though, problematic owing to the verb KN (kāna), instead of which one would expect to see kunūt. A possible solution is that the verb has been attracted to LMWTW, which is at least less unsatisfying than the proposals of Bellamy and Naveh - Shaked.

Thus Bellamy's reading presupposes accepting three unproven hypotheses in a text of one and a half lines! This alone would make it hard to accept, but there is also other contrary evidence to it: in my opinion, the most conspicuous (and, from a literary point of view, important) feature of the inscription is the strong parallelism between lines 4-5. Cf. the clauses:

\[
\text{FKN HN'} \ YB'N' \ 'LMWTW \ L' \ 'B\'H \ vs.} \\
\text{FKN HN'} \ 'XX \ GXH\text{W} \ L' \ 'YXXN'
\]

Unless something else is definitely proven, I strongly favour seeing here parallelism used as a stylistic device\(^{13}\), which is common in both Arabic and other Semitic

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\(^{10}\) Suffice it to quote Qur. 3:75: wa-min ahli l-kitābi man in ta'manhu bi-qintārīn yu'addihi ilayka (...).

\(^{11}\) Indicative or, less probably, jussive (abghīhi) although in the latter case one would expect it to be negated with lam. However lam is an innovation in Arabic, so there is no concrete evidence for its existence at the time.

\(^{12}\) Why Naveh and Shaked have not accepted this obvious translation (p. 58: "The phrase should thus mean 'if death claim us, I shall not claim it', which makes no sense") is not clear to me. I can perfectly well understand why one does not seek (sic, there is no need to stick to the translation 'claim') death even though death is seeking him. At least it is more credible than the bogus solution of reading it as an Aramaic verb with a strange and otherwise unattested assimilation within Arabic text.
litteratures. We seem to have here two sets of parallels. The more obvious is the parallelism between YB'N' and B'SH on the other hand, and 'XX and YXXN' on the other (as well as the repetition of FKN HN' ... L'), but there is also a "semantic" parallelism is also possible: reading the commonest possible verb for 'XX and YXXN' (where X = d, dh or r), we get arāda and yuridūnā (or yuridnā) the meaning of which parallels that of YB'N' and B'SH.

If the preceding arguments, or at least some of them are accepted, Bellamy's reading has to be dropped and with it his metrical speculations. I am afraid that the 'En 'Avdat inscription brings us no nearer to the solution of the birth of Arabic verse.

Naveh and Shaked, and following them Bellamy, have taken ll. 1-3 and 6 to be in Aramaic and ll. 4-5 in (early) Arabic. I would like to draw attention to the fact that there is no reason why the last line could not be read in Arabic, too. It reads:

I. 6: GRM'LYH KT. B. BYDH

This would be perfectly clear Arabic: Garmallāhi kataba bi-yadihi, and would divide the inscription nicely in two parts, ll. 1-3 in Aramaic and ll. 4-6 in Arabic.

The Arabic part is admittedly difficult and defies, I think, our attempts to understand it precisely. Even the first clause (FYF'L' FDY WL' TR') is not quite as clear as the editors (and following them Bellamy) lead us to think. The basic meaning of athar is 'trace', also that of 'a wound', not 'favour' (but the fourth stem āthara 'to favour' the infinitive of which would be written in scriptio defectiva THR = āthārī). Fidan means primarily 'ransom'. In the adverbial accusative, these words may give the cause of the action fa-yaf'ālu, but then a natural translation of FYF'L' FDY WL' TR' would be, if we base ourselves on Classical Arabic, "he acts/will act neither as a ransom (of something which is not mentioned) nor as a favour(?)" - the meaning of which is hardly clear.

What, then, do we positively know of the Arabic part of the inscription? Unfortunately little. It seems to contain three main clauses (four if we include ll. 6), two of which probably have embedded subordinate clauses, if we take HN' as a conditional particle, itself a disputable point. In addition, there are several identifiable Arabic words. Beyond reasonable doubt are fa-, lā, (a)l-, mawt and the verbs kāna,
fa‘ala and baghā together with the suffixes attached to them (and kataba, bi- and yad, if we accept l. 6 as being Arabic). All the other words and their translations are conjectural and open to discussion, and will probably remain so until more inscriptions similar to the present one are found. Until then, it is extremely perilous to build any far-reaching theories on the base of the few lines of the ‘En ‘Avdat inscription.