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A NOTE ON THE ʿĒN ʿAVDAT INSCRIPTION

In the latest number of *JSS* (35, 1990) Professor Bellamy published a short article¹ on the ʿĒn ʿAvdat 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

l. 4: FYF^ʿL L' FX' WL' 'TX' FKN HN' YB^ʿN' 'LMWTW L'

l. 5: 'B^ʿH FKN HN' 'XX GXḤW L' YXXN'

b)⁵

l. 4: fa-yaf^ʿalu lā fidan wa-lā atharan fa-kāna in⁶ yabghinā l-mawtu lā

l. 5: abghihī⁷ fa-kāna in arāda ḡurḡun⁸ lā yuridnā

l. 4: And he acts neither for benefit nor for favour. And if death claim us let me not

l. 5: be claimed. And if affliction seeks, let it not seek us.

c)

l. 4: fa-yaf^ʿalu lā fidan (or fidā) wa-lā 'atharā fa-kāna hunā yabghīnā 'al-mawtū lā

l. 5: 'abghāhu fa-kāna hunā 'adāda ḡurḡun lā yurḡīnā

l. 4: For (Obodas) works without reward or favour, and he, when⁹ death tried to claim us, did not

l. 5: let it claim (us), for when a wound (of ours) festered, he did not let us perish.

¹ J.A. Bellamy, Arabic verses from the first/second century: the inscription of ʿĒn ʿAvdat. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 35 (1990), pp. 73-79.

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 unvocalized 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 *ctpe^ʿel* (p. 58), which is a rather fantastic proposition.

⁸ To be vocalized so, not *ḡarḡ* as in Naveh - Shaked, p. 58.

⁹ Bellamy argues against reading KN HN' as a reflex of what would in Classical Arabic be *kāna in*, and prefers to see in HN' an (otherwise unattested) temporal particle = Classical *idhā* (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 parenthetic conditional clause embedded within the main clause is quite acceptable¹⁰, so it is possible to read: fa-kāna (in yabghinā l-mawtu) lā abghīhi, and: fa-kāna (in arāda⁷ ġurḥun) lā yurīdunā, even though in the first phrase *kuntu* would look better if 'B^cH 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 'B^cH 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 abghīhi¹¹, 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 *kuntu*. 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:

FKN HN' YB^cN' 'LMWTW L' 'B^cH vs.
FKN HN' 'XX GXḤW L' YXXN'

Unless something else is definitely proven, I strongly favour seeing here parallelism used as a stylistic device¹³, which is common in both Arabic and other Semitic

¹⁰ Suffice it to quote Qur. 3:75: wa-min ahli l-kitābi man *in ta'manhu bi-qinḥārin* 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.

literatures. We seem to have here two sets of parallels. The more obvious is the parallelism between YBʿN' and BʿH 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 yurīdunā (or yuridnā) the meaning of which parallels that of YBʿN' and BʿH.

If the preceding arguments, or at least some of them are accepted, Bellamy's reading has to be dropped and with it his metrical speculations¹⁴. I am afraid that the ʿĒn ʿAvdat 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:

l. 6: GRM'LHY KT BYDH

This would be perfectly clear Arabic: Garmallāhi kataba bi-yadihi¹⁵, 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 (FYFʿL 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'¹⁶, not 'favour' (but the fourth stem āthara 'to favour' the infinitive of which would be written in scriptio defectiva 'THR = īthār¹⁷). Fidan means primarily 'ransom'. In the adverbial accusative, these words may give the cause of the action fa-yafʿalu, but then a natural translation of FYFʿL 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 little¹⁸. It seems to contain three main clauses (four if we include l. 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,

¹³ For the role of parallelism in Arabic literature, see *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, vol. 1 (1983), pp. 180-185.

¹⁴ Note also that a verse inscription would in any case be surprising. Indeed, it would not be surprising if the "verses" are not rhymed because the use of rhyme is an Arabic innovation in Semitic literature.

¹⁵ That the subject precedes the verb need not astonish us, as it is well known from both literary texts and inscriptions that the word order SVO was widely used in Arabic even though in normative grammar it was not accepted.

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. Tāğ al-ʿArūs s.v. 'THR: uthr = athar al-ğirāh yabqā baʿd al-bur' (note the association of athar and ġurh also here!).

¹⁷ But āthara 'to prefer, to choose' is a secondary meaning obviously derived from athar = ʿalam, i.e. 'to mark' (something for oneself) > 'to choose'.

¹⁸ It is not for nothing that Naveh and Shaked say that "...their [ll. 4-5] interpretation is fraught with difficulties" (p. 58), and Bellamy admits that "there is, consequently, much room for speculation" (p. 73).

faʿala 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 ʿĒn ʿAvdat inscription.