Evidence of Agriculture in the Safaitic Inscriptions and Drawings

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Abstract

This paper sheds light, for the first time, on a variety of agricultural activities of the Safaitic Arabs, living in the region extending from Tulul as-Safa in Syria and Wadi as-Sirhan in Saudi Arabia, during the period between the first century B.C. and the third century A.D. The Safaitic people were also generally known for herding cattle and raiding. This paper presents three drawings depicting people ploughing land. One of these drawings has an inscription in which its writer states that he owned two bulls, which is an aird proof of Safaitic people using bulls in agriculture.

1. Introduction

Most scholars believe that the Safaitic inscriptions were inscribed by people of the Arab tribes who lived nomadic or seminomadic life of pasturing and raiding (Littman 1940, p.97; Oxtoby 1968, p. 13; Winnett and Harding 1978, p.27). As the inscriptions inform us, Safaitic tribesmen lived on herding cattle, raiding, revenge and other interests of the writers, like spelling out their affiliation, (I al: from the tribe of ...) . In addition, there is an occurrence of the word lbdlw, 'homo deserti', in the inscriptions themselves (Corpus, 1950, No. 3962). The majority of the Safaitic inscriptions were discovered in pastoral regions where the modern bedouins still practice the same style of living.

Other evidence from the inscriptions shows that some of the Safaites were engaged in agriculture as well as pasturing and herding. For example, there is an inscription stating that its writer "sowed the ru'dah" (Macdonald 1992, p.32/ fn.3; Corpus 1950, No.4985). Although he doesn't name what he had sown, it can be concluded that he dealt with barley and wheat, as these grains are still well-known in the area and are very important for the residents and their animals. Both words br't"brley" and br, "wheat", are also attested in the Safaitic inscriptions. (Winnett and Harding, 1978, No. 2035, 1404, 1404, 1938). In addition, the word bqr "cow" and jr "bull" which are very difficult animals to raise in a nomadic environment are attested also in the Safaitic texts.

Of the seven inscriptions containing the word bqr, five originated from Nemerah, al-Hubariyya and al-Hifneh. The copy of the sixth text which came from the Rubbah or Wadies-Sam is obviously unreliable (Corpus 1950, N.974. While the seventh inscription is of unknown provenance, but it seems to mention spending the spring season with some cattle (Macdonald 1979, p.114-115; macdonald 1993, p.318–319). Most of these inscriptions were found in areas of permanent water where it would be feasible to raise cattle.

In modern time there is a sort of symbiotic relationship between some of the Bedouin who own land in the steppe of Ma'fraq and the farmers who live in cultivated areas, around Haoran and Gabel ad-Druz. Through such a relationship, farmers used to come with their cattle to the steppe of Ma'fraq in Jordan until the 1960's to sow and plant the land. Moreover, during the first decade of this century, E.Littmann among others, saw cattle south of the Haoran mountains in the desert (between Şabha, Dafyana and in al-Gauf); sometimes, camels were seen together with cattle. Littmann argued that the cattle, which the Safaites mentioned, might be "Buckelrinder" (Littmann 1940,p.100). This might mean that the sedentary people (farmers), came to the Safaitic area, and therefore, the Safaitic people had seen the cattle with them and mentioned them in their inscriptions, or drew them, which should not mean that a part of the Safaitic people had their own cattle.

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There are other Safaitic inscriptions containing the word bqr, but it is not certain that they refer to cattle (Winnett and Harding 1978,no.709,3657b). It is more probable that they referred to the taur waḥši "a bull Oryx". (King 1990, p.70.fn.34; Macdonald, 1993, p.318, fn. 100). King recently published a very interesting drawing of two animals pulling a yoke, and a man holding a plough in one hand and a stick in the other, with the animals facing out in opposite directions from each other. This drawing is accompanied by an inscription which does not refer to the depiction (see Fig.1). A. Betts kindly sent me a slide of a drawing of two animals pulling a yoke, and a man holding a plough behind the animals (see Fig.2). This drawing was found by A. Betts near Ġadir al-Mallah which lies about 23 Kms northeast of the Aṣṣra oasis. The two drawings are rough, and it is difficult to identify the animals that the Safaites used in ploughing their land. It is probable that the second drawing is older than the Safaitic period, even if some Safaitic letters appear (not as a complete inscription) on the same stone which bears the drawing. It is also possible that the drawing belongs to an earlier stage than the Safaitic period, or that the artist who made it did not have the talent for drawing like that of many other Safaitic people who made a great deal of good drawings on the volcanic stones of the Harraḥ region.

In 1987, Mr Mohammad Bahyty al-Mʿarir from Um al-Quṭṭān informed me of some cairns around Ġadir al-Mallah (the same area where A.Betts found the second drawing. During my visit to the site on November 16,1987, hundreds of Safaitic and Arabic inscriptions and drawings were found and therefore it was decided to undertake fieldwork at the site. The survey conducted in the first season revealed two drawings of animals bearing a yoke in the same area, but not at the same cairn.

The first drawing provides evidence of two bulls facing opposite directions pulling a yoke in one hand and a plough in the other, the drawing is followed by an inscription that contains the word ḥṛn "these two bulls", which must refer to the bulls in the drawing (see Fig.3). Therefore, ḥr does not mean "wild bull" in Safaitic, at least in this inscription.

Ingm bn ḥṣd ḥrpm ṭṛdḥ ḥdr
ngm: is a well known personal name in Safaitic (Harding 1971, p.582). Moreover, Ibn Duraid (1979,p.133) mentioned the Arabic name Abu Nağm as Kunyah.

The (ג) in the first name ḥrpm has possibly been reused by another writer in a vertical text which reads l ḫg̱ "by Bg̱ag̱". The names ḥṣd, bgh were found in other Safaitic inscriptions (Harding 1971,p.93), but the drawing and the text are surrounded by a dotted line, whereas the lam which belongs to the new name ḫg̱ is written on the line itself.

ḥṣd: occurs for the first time as a personal name in Safaitic, whereas ḥṣd as a tribal name, is mentioned in a Thamudic text (Winnett and Reed 1970,p.77,No.11) and in an inscription from Biyar al-Guṣain.

ḥrpm: These two bulls, the word tr, as mentioned above, occurs in two inscriptions from Burqʿ. Winnett and Harding connect it with bulls (Winnett and Harding 1978,p.506,No.3657b), but King compares the meaning of this word with the drawings which accompany the inscriptions and concludes that it should mean taur waḥši "a wild male ibex", and not "bull" as other scholars think (King, 1990,p.64-66); but personally I approve of the translation "bull" by Winnett and Harding for the word tr in (Winnett and Harding 1978,No.3657b).

ṭṛdḥ: The grapheme (ח) at the end looks like the grapheme of the (ח), but it is not plausible. The word ṭṛdḥ can be read and vocalized as waṭaradahu "and he followed him".

ḥdr: The (ח) can be understood as a definite article whereas ha-ḥayr means "good fortune" "wealth". Thus, the author of this text points out that he has a good harvest. The word ḥdr occurs in another text from ‘Arar where the publisher understood it as a personal name (Jame 1969,No.37). But later on Jamme translated the word ḥr as "wealth" in another Safaitic inscription (Jamme1971, No.155).
Finally, it can be seen that the dots behind the animals and above the ploughman are usually understood as the seven magical dots. Also the text can be translated as follows:

"These two bulls are by Nağam son of Ḥaṣid, who had been chased by wealth (which means that he was lucky or had a good harvest)".

The last drawing is not accompanied by writing, but it is very clear and carefully drawn. It depicts one bull, which looks very healthy and strong, with a yoke and a plough behind it. The man behind the plough has a rope in one hand and presses the plough with the other (see Fig.4). It is remarkable that the men in the drawings No.2 and 3, are standing in an upright position, whereas the ploughman in this drawing is seen in a bent position; such a position was unusual sight in the mountain regions of Jordan until a few years ago. The ploughman in the drawing published by King is also in a bent position (see Fig.1), but it was a crude drawing.

The area where the last drawing was found (Fig.3 and 4), was located to the east of the highway which runs through the Azraq Oasis and aṣ-Ṣafawi. They were found in a Wadi called by the local Gadir al-Mallah. The name of the Gadir comes from the Arabic word miḥl "salt". This is because the Azraq area is full of salt oasis. Also, this Wadi is a branch of Wdi Raḡil which comes from Syria and ends in the Azraq oasis. The route of the Wadi is full of Safaitic cairns: 861 Safaitic inscriptions; three Tamudic, two Syriae, one short Nabataean, and 26 Islamic inscriptions were recorded during three field expeditions, between 1987 and 1991. Two of the Islamic inscriptions were written by Syrian rebels against the French mandate in Syria (Al-Khraysheh 987,p.14). The land along the Wadi and the huge ruḥbah called beq̲ī‘wiyah lies 2km to the west of the cairns where the drawings were found. Beq̲ī‘wiyah seems to be suitable for cultivation and agriculture. The Bedouins nowadays, who settle around that area, spend their winter time in the Ḥarrah area, sowing crops along the Wadi, and in summer harvesting it. But if the harvest is not good enough, they feed it to their herds. They seem to practice the same style of living as their ancestors, the Safites.

Water is not a major problem for Bedouins nowadays, because they have vehicles to bring any needed water for themselves and their animals, while the Safaites obtained their water from the large Gadir "big pool" around the Wadi, or from Azraq oasis, which is, around 20 km south-west from Gadir al-Mallah.

It can be concluded from such drawings, that some of the Safaitic people were interested in cultivating their land while others probably let other people cultivate some of their land. This means that some of the Safaitic people were seminomadic farmers and had settled in some places. Also, it might be that their life had been developed as a result of a Roman political environment, which helped some of them to settle as the case of some of the Bedouin area who live in the same nowadays. In addition, such drawings and inscriptions which include the word bqr, clearly indicate cows and not hucklerrider, as Littmann believed when he studied those safaitic inscriptions that were not combined with drawings that refer to their subject.

Notes

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1. wzr‘h rḥbt
2. winnett and Harding 1978, No.2035.
   Ld’y bn ṣwkt wḥwy l ʾṣrt
   "by duaiy b.ṣaukat. He was hungry for a grain of barely”.
   "for Aziz b. QML is refuse of the wheat (?)”
   cf. also WH 1938: ḥbj wḥb’ br ḥmyn
   "By BIJ. He hid the wheat (or in the well) of Ḥumiyān”. 

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4. These are the inscriptions:
   LP 90= CIS 3791: wn gy b bḥqr
   LP 155: wy b bḥqr
   LP 159: wnl b bḥqr
   CIS 392: bqr yzn
   CIS 3531: bḥqr bṣrt
5. CIS 974: frṣ b bḥqr (r) w ḥt(s) ḥsn fḥltlm.
6. wḥṣ b bḥqr.
7. WH 709 "1 hrs bn b's hgp. 'The bull is by Ḥaras b. ḥa-'Aṣūs'."
   WH 3657b: b b's hgp. 'The bull is by Ḥa-'Aṣūs'.
8. The inscription is to be read as follows: ḥbn bṣrt bn 'mḥm ṭl bhr.
9. I thank Dr. Alison Betts for giving me the permission to publish this drawing. Also the
   Safaitic letters are a part of an inscription or the name of the man who had drawn the
   illustration.
10. Between 1978 and 1992, I made three expeditions to Gādir-mallah area. I thank
    the people who participated in the fieldwork Mr. Muhammad A. Aḥbannah, research assistant
    at the Epigraphy Department, Yarmouk University; Mr. Mrmūd Al-Rusān and
    students of the department as well as Mr. Husseīn Dībāgheh and Mwaffaq Batainah.
11. Al-Khāṣṣeex F. "Naqūs Qādaḫūn min Al-Urdin (Sāfawiyya)" Forthcoming issue.

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Fig 1.
G. King, 1990

Fig. 2
Gadir al-Mallash, Cairn 21
Fig. 3
gādir al-mallāḥ, cairn 1

Fig. 4
gādir al-mallāḥ, cairn 2