

Ahmad AL-JALLAD

The Religion and Rituals of the Nomads of Pre-Islamic Arabia. A Reconstruction Based on the Safaitic Inscriptions

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This 150-page book, the last 60 of which are appendices, can almost be read like a novel. It is easy to carry around, very clearly written, and well produced despite ten or so typing mistakes which were not corrected by the publisher's editorial department.

Ahmad Al-Jallad offers the academic community the first synthesis on the religion and rituals of the nomads who wrote in the Ancient North Arabian script known as "Safaitic". The latter is used to label a "writing tradition and script the nomads of the basalt desert east of the Ḥawrān employed some twenty centuries ago" from possibly the 3rd century BCE to before the 4th century CE (p. 7). One should thus be aware that apart from a short presentation of other Ancient North Arabian scripts (Thamudic B and Dadanitic), the reconstructed religion and rituals are exclusively that of the authors of the Safaitic inscriptions. This is understandable if one considers that the corpus of the latter represents more than three quarters of the total number of the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions recorded in the Online corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia, OCIANA, developed at Oxford University and now available at <https://ociana.osu.edu/>.⁽¹⁾

The volume contains also a map as well as several useful and previously unpublished charts which illustrate the statements: the frequency of deities in invocations (p. 99), the themes in the narrative part of the texts (p. 19), and others. Appendices include a glossary of the divinities comprising 47 entries, and a 30-page appendix contains about 40 previously unpublished texts recorded during the 2019 season of the Badia Survey Mission. The siglum of these texts is BESS19 and at the time this review is written, they had not been entered in the OCIANA database

yet.⁽²⁾ BESS19 2 is particularly interesting because it contains two long narratives describing the author's activities when he was probably a Roman auxiliary soldier. BESS19 3 to 18 (representing 38 texts because some numbers are subdivided) are all part of an "archaeological" complex located in Wādī al-Khūdārī (northeastern Jordan) made of a row of small tumuli and two cleared out spaces around which 38 inscriptions are clustered. Two individuals only are grieved for in the texts and the author convincingly interprets the complex as a mortuary site (p. 114).

Following these two appendices are a bibliography, a rather short general index, and an epigraphic index. It may have been useful to include an index of the Safaitic terms discussed in the volume. Indeed, the *Safaitic Dictionary* was published three years before the book under review, and it not completely up to date given the results presented in the current volume.⁽³⁾ To take only one example, the word *str* is described in the dictionary as "a structure of some sort" while in *The Religion* volume, it is the object of a whole subchapter and is defined as being possibly "a ritual installation, a temporary structure associated with the performance of sacral activities, finding a typological parallel in the biblical Tabernacle" (p. 40).

Below is a short, non-exhaustive list of the words which may have been added to the general index:

Word	Translation	Page(s)
'srf	to make a burnt offering	48
'sly	to make a burnt offering	48
tdy	to call out	60 n. 12
tʒr	to lay in wait (tʒr mny, 'Fate lay in wait')	41, 75-76
hg/hgg	pilgrimage/ to set off on pilgrimage	41-42
dbḥ	to perform an animal sacrifice	17-19
dl	to be subservient/to supplicate	69
rḥḍ	to clean ritually	44
str	shelter	37, 40
š'd	to make a burnt offering	48
šlm	statue	40
šmd	high place	24-25
ṭw'	to obey	69

⁽²⁾ In the translation of BESS19 1, read Ḥlmt, not Ḥlmt.

⁽³⁾ A. Al-Jallad, K. Jaworska, *A Dictionary of the Safaitic Inscriptions*, Leiden & Boston, Brill (Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics, 98), 2019.

⁽¹⁾ 30,818 out of 38,056 on October 1th, 2024.

Word	Translation	Page(s)
<i>thr</i>	to purify	44, 46
<i>qbl</i>	to make an offering	47
<i>qdm</i>	to make an offering	47
<i>qrb</i>	to make an offering	47
<i>mny</i>	Fate (see <i>tṣr</i>)	75-77
<i>ntn</i>	to make an offering ⁽⁴⁾	47
<i>nfs</i>	<i>nefesh</i> -stele	33, 35
<i>nqʿ</i>	watering places	54
<i>ytm</i>	to be orphan/to be in need	70

A very interesting aspect of the author's approach is the attention he pays to the archaeological context of the inscriptions, in particular with regard to the mortuary rituals. The association of stones bearing Safaitic inscriptions with archaeological structures that can be observed in the landscape is rare, as for a long time, epigraphists have not paid much attention to the surroundings of the texts they recorded. The present reviewer was convinced by the author's interpretation of some of the structures: a grave (*rgm*, 'cairn' and/or *qbr*, 'grave'), a *nefesh* (*nfs*), a shelter (*str*), and a standing stone (*nšb*), all used during the funerary rituals of these nomads.⁽⁵⁾ With regard to the *nšb*, the arguments for the interpretation of the word as "a component of at least some mortuary complexes and the rituals involved with the burial and commemoration of the dead" are convincing. Yet, it is also possible that the stones were placed upon the dead in order to put the burial under the protection of the deity represented by the *nšb* as a standing stone. This usage of the *nšb*/betyl in funerary contexts is attested among the Nabataeans in Petra, al-Bad', and Hegra.⁽⁶⁾

On the important issue of the pilgrimage (Safaitic *ḥg*), the author rightly points out that most probably "the pilgrimage sites were not located in the Ḥarrah". The only known pilgrimage site is that of *sʿʿ*, which corresponds to modern Sī', just SE of Qanawāt, ancient Kanatha. It may have been useful, for the reader, to give some bibliography on the site,

especially since it has been excavated and was the object of various interpretations in the past.⁽⁷⁾

The identification of *'mn* with Wadi Ram is based on the facts that Allāt is said in two Safaitic inscriptions to be "from *'mn*" and that a temple was consecrated to this goddess at Wadi Ram. This identification should probably be more argued, for instance by recalling that Allāt was worshipped neither in Petra nor in Boṣrā. Also, in Hegra, she is said in Nabataean inscription JSNab 16 *dy mn 'mnd*, "who is from *'mnd*". In this case, could *'mnd* be a variant of *'mn*?

In the chapter on the gods and their worshippers (p. 60-72), A. J. examines the aspects of the life of the authors of the Safaitic inscriptions which appear in the prayers they write to the gods, such as security, relief, deliverance, protection from the enemies and misfortune. Other prayers give a glimpse into more prosaic wishes of these nomads: long life, reunion with the family, relief from a limp, loss of a sheep, curing of an illness, etc. They provide a vivid snapshot of their concerns.

Below is a subjective list of interesting ideas or useful reminders put forward by the author:

- Safaitic grew out of the Thamudic B writing tradition (p. 5 n. 22);
- Safaitic inscriptions have a formulaic structure characterized by a genealogy, followed by a narrative. The interesting point raised by the author relates to the semantic connection between the narrative and the prayer, which are complementary (p. 10). Many examples are given where the two are bound to each other;
- on the reference to Jesus in a Safaitic text, mentioned p. 7 n. 28, see now Ahmad Al-Jallad, and Ali al-Manaser, 'The Pre-Islamic Divine Name *'sy* and the Background of the Qur'ānic Jesus', *Journal of the International Qur'anic Association*, 2021, no. 6, p. 107-136.
- sacrifices are often mentioned in the texts, usually with the word *ḍbh*. The sacrificed animal is not always mentioned but when it is, the animal is always a camel, which was, the author rightly recalls, a valuable and important beast (p. 18-19);

(4) Note that several words are used to express for the same action.

(5) List given p. 82-83, but see chapters 2.2.1 (*nšb*), 2.3 (*str*), and 5.1 (burials).

(6) L. Bigot-Démereau, G. Charloux, W. Badaiwi, K. Guadagnini, F. Larché, L. Naggiar, S.A. Sahlah, "The Nabataean Monumental Rock-Cut Tombs of Mughāyir Shu'ayb and al-Aṣīfir in the oasis of al-Bad' (Saudi Arabia): Preliminary Architectural Study and Spatial Organisation of the Necropolis", *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 2024. See p. 9, with earlier references.

(7) These can be found in J. Dentzer-Feydy, "New Archaeological Research at the Sanctuary of Sī' in Southern Syria: the Graeco-Roman Divinities Invite themselves to Baalshamin", in M. Blömer, A. Lichtenberger, R. Raja (eds), *Religious Identities in the Levant from Alexander to Muhammad. Continuity and Change*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2015, 313-328.

- sacrifices could be performed in the open-air, in the Ḥarrah itself, but some places held a particular significance. One of them, in north-eastern Jordan, published in 2015, is described and analysed again. It is the closest parallel, in the Ḥarrah, to the Nabataean and other high places where sacrifices were performed, while an inscription discovered at another site designates this type of place as a *šmd*, to be compared with Arabic *šamdun*, ‘high ground’ (p. 22-23);
- the author suggests a possible semantic connection between *sikkānum/skn* used in Bronze Age in the city states of Mari, Ugarit, and Emar to refer to the standing stones on the one hand, and Greek Βαίτυλος, the equivalent of Semitic *byt ’l*, ‘dwelling of (the) god’. The important concept is the fact that the standing stones were “regarded as vessels that divinities could occupy for the duration of a ritual”;⁽⁸⁾
- *nfs(s)*, pl. *’(n)fs*, ‘funerary monument’, is used in the Safaitic inscriptions with the verb *bny*, ‘built’. This indicates that for the nomads who wrote these texts, this monument was more than a simple commemorative stele (p. 33);
- having examined the use of the term *str*, A.J. concludes that it refers to some kind of shelter used while performing sacral activities. Although nothing, neither in the inscriptions nor in the places where they were written, allows to determine what the *str* looked like, the existence of such a shelter provides a new brick for the reconstruction of the religious material culture of the nomads who populated the Ḥarrah;
- the chapter describing the role of the gods as it appears in the inscriptions is also very interesting: as representing astral phenomena (*śms* and possibly *blg*, the sun); Allāt, abundance and fertility; Roḏaw, possibly the Moon; Ba’al-Samīn, rain and storm as well as “master of the rains/heaven”, called upon to send rains. One should perhaps only be cautious with respect to the familial relationships between the gods. For instance, the idea that Allāt was the mother of Dūšarā because in Nabataean inscriptions she is said *’m ’lhy’ dy mr’n’ rb’l*, “mother of the gods of our lord Rabb-’El” while Dūšarā is said *’lh mr’n’*, “the god of our lord”, is perhaps not enough to consider that this may have been true in the Safaitic context;
- the interpretation of the phrase *tẓr mny*, ‘Fate lay in wait’ is very convincing (p. 75-76) and it makes indeed more sense to consider that Fate is “stalking the living” than assume that the author of the texts is “simply awaiting what must happen to come to pass”;
- finally, A. J. provides a useful synthesis on the burial installations, their shape and the objects that were found in some of them. The only reserve would be the function attributed to the *nšb*, the standing stone, which may have been used to put the tombs under divine protection and not necessarily “allow for supernatural participation”.

All in all, this work renews completely the so far fragmented image we had of the religion and rituals of the nomads who wrote the Safaitic inscriptions. It appears to be more complex and organised than previously assumed, with the existence of structures – whether built to some extent or simply set up and dismantled after use – used to perform the rituals. It also brings light on a number of concepts and what may be called a proper religious tradition. Many ideas put forward in the volume are not mentioned in this short review but this work is worth being read as the religious novel of the most prolific ancient nomads in the Near East.

Laila Nehmé

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(8) p. 27, with references to the original work in which this idea was given.