

On the Nabataean-Aramaic 'lyt'*

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Resumen

En esta contribución nos ocupamos de precisar el significado del término 'lyt', que aparece en una inscripción bilingüe arameo-nabatea y griega.

Palabras clave

Arameo-nabateo, griego, inscripción, semitística comparada

Abstract

This contribution focuses on the meaning of the term 'lyt', included in a bilingual Nabataean Aramaic-Greek inscription.

Keywords

Nabataean Aramaic, Greek, inscription, comparative Semitics

Introduction

Records confirm the presence of Nabataean groups in the Sinai Peninsula, Petra and Transjordan in the 4th century BC; the "Nabataean state" was probably established around a pre-Nabataean population, which gradually absorbed visitors and expatriates who, though not Nabataean, were considered as such for administrative and political purposes.¹ The information provided by the sources² not only sheds valuable light on the

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¹ M. C. A. Macdonald 'Was the Nabataean kingdom a 'Bedouin state'?', *Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina Vereins* 107 (1991), p. 108.

² John F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*. "Religions in the Graeco-Roman World" 136 (Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill, 2001), pp. 25-37.

origin of the Nabateans,³ but also enables their history to be sketched out with a fair degree of historiographical and sociological rigour.⁴

According to the sources, Nabataean groups started to migrate during the Persian period, along a trans-Arabian trade route linking southern Babylonia to the Nile Delta. The route, used by the Nabataeans during the Hellenistic period, was still extant during the Early Islamic period, though by then linked to their new settlements in the Ḥawrān⁵.

The fall of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires enabled the establishment of a strong and relatively autonomous state. Although neither its ethnic diversity nor the languages and scripts used by its people can be determined with any certainty,⁶ in time this state came to be regarded as “Arab” in documents of all kinds; and more than one of its rulers was styled “king of the Arabs” (ὁ Ἀράβων βασιλεύς).⁷

Given these sociohistorical circumstances, a diachronic linguistic analysis would clearly conclude that the language of the Nabatean groups arose through affinities and contacts between what might be termed the ‘Nabatean Aramaic-Arabic dialect’ and the dialect used by Mesopotamian Arab groups during the Neo-Assyrian Period.⁸ Even so, this linguistic hybridisation was undoubtedly heightened by contact with other languages; especially Greek but also, obviously, the various Aramaic dialects spoken in the surrounding areas.⁹

³ David F. Graf, ‘The Origin of the Nabateans’, *Aram* 2(1990), pp. 45-50. Cf. René Dussaud, *La Pénétration des Arabes en Syrie avant l’Islam* (Paris: Geuthner, 1955), pp. 21-61. Giovanni Garbini, *Introduzione all’epigrafia semitica*. “Studi sul Vicino Oriente antico” 4 (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 2006), pp. 210-211.

⁴ Adolf Grohmann, ‘Nabataioi’, in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Neue Bearbeitung begonnen von Georg Wissowa, ed. Wilhelm Kroll (Stuttgart: Alfred Druckenmüller, 1935), XVI/2, pp. 1453-1468; Jean Starcky, ‘The Nabataeans: A Historical Sketch’, *The Biblical Archaeologist* 18/4 (1955), pp. 84-106. Both studies have been updated by Avraham Negev, ‘The Nabataeans and the Provincia Arabia’, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. Hildegard Temporini-Wolfgang Haase (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), pp. 520-686.

⁵ D.F. Graf, ‘The Origin of the Nabateans’, *Aram* 2 (1990), p. 67.

⁶ Michael C.A. Macdonald, ‘Some reflections on epigraphy and ethnicity in the Roman Near East’, *Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (1998), p. 185; M.C.A. Macdonald, ‘Les Arabes en Syrie’ or ‘La pénétration des Arabes en Syrie’: a question of perceptions?, in Maurice Sartre (ed.), *La Syrie hellénistique*. Actes du colloque de Tours. “Topoi” Supplement 4 (Paris: De Boccard, 2003), pp. 306-307.

⁷ Enrico Magnelli, ‘Posidippo (10 A.-B.) e gli Arabi Nabatei’, *Aegyptus* LXXXIV/1-2 (2004), pp. 151-155.

⁸ D.F. Graf, ‘The Origin of the Nabateans’, *Aram* 2 (1990), pp. 59-68.

⁹ See Zbigniew T. Fiema, Ahmad a-Jallad, M.C.A. Macdonald & Laila Nehmé, ‘Provincia Arabia: Nabataea, the Emergence of Arabic as a Written Language, and Graeco-Arabica’, in *Arabs and Empires before Islam*. Edited by Greg Fisher (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 373-433.

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This note focuses on the term 'lyt', whose meaning – though widely inferred from the context – has not yet been fully defined. The word appears in one of a set of inscriptions from the Ba'alshamīn temple complex at Sī' (Ḥawrān), near the Decapolis city of Qanawāt,¹⁰ a major religious centre and probably a focus of pilgrimage.¹¹

The Nabataean text and its Greek version, of which various editions have been published,¹² are shown below, followed by the English translation:

1. *dnhšlm'dy'qymw'l'byšt*
2. *lmlyktbrm'yrwbrmlykt*
3. *lqbldyhwbnhbyrt''lyt'*
4. *kdwbr'byšt'mn'šlm*
5. Ὀδοῦ μοσοτῶν Ὀβαισηνῶν ἐτείμησεν Μαλεῖχαθον Μοαίερου ὑπεροικοδομήσαντ[α] τὸ ἱερὸν ἀρετῆς τε καὶ εὐσεβείας χάριν

1. This is the statue which the tribe of 'Ubayšat
2. erected for Malikat son of Mu'ayru son of Malikat,
3. because it was he who built the upper part of the temple.
4. Kadu son of 'Ubayšat the artisan. Peace.
5. The people of Obaisēnes honoured Maleíchatos son of Moaiéros, who built the upper part of the temple on account of his virtue and piety.

The Aramaic-Nabataean term 'lyt' corresponds in the Greek text to ὑπεροικοδομέω ('on, 'on top of = Latin *superstruo*),¹³ as Healey explains in his

¹⁰ Judith McKenzie, *The Architecture of Petra*. 'British Academy Monographs in Archaeology' 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 90.

¹¹ For a description, see J.F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans*, pp. 65-67.

¹² Melchior de Vogüé, *Syrie central: inscriptions sémitiques*. Avec traduction et commentaire (Paris: J. Baudry, 1868-77), pp. 94-96 (n° 3), later included in *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars secunda, inscriptions aramaicas continentis, tomus unus* (Paris: e Reipublicae Typographeo, 1889), pp. 197-198 (n° 164); Jean Cantineau, *Le Nabatéen*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1930-32; reimp. Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1978), II, pp. 13-14; A.G. Grushevoi, 'The Tribe 'Ubaishat in Safaitic, Nabataean and Greek Inscriptions', *Berytus* 33 (1985), pp. 51-54; Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew and Nabataean Documentary Texts from the Judaean Desert and Related Material*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2000), A 309, B [101]; Ursula Hackl, Hanna Jenni & Christoph Schneider, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Nabatäer: Textsammlung mit Übersetzung und Kommentar*. "Novum Testamentum et orbis antiquus" 51 (Freiburg – Göttingen: Universitätsverlag – Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2003), pp. 174-176; J.F. Healey, *Aramaic Inscriptions and Documents of the Roman Periods. Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, Volume IV* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 115-117; cf. J.F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans*, p. 66.

¹³ Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (New York – Chicago – Cincinnati: American Book Company, 1897), 1616a; E.A. Sophocles, *Greek Lexicon of the*

examination of 'lyt':¹⁴

'upper' (fem.) is the meaning made clear also by the Greek verb *ὑπεροικοδομέω*, 'build on top of' or 'build the upper part of'. The precise meaning is not in the end clear: perhaps a vertical extension, or an extension on higher ground?

In this context, the term 'lyt', clearly points to an upper or raised room or chamber, in this case of the temple (*byrt'* = *τὸ ἕρπον*),¹⁵ which is referred to explicitly in the inscription, although the dimensions of the space indicated by the term are not defined.

The Aramaic-Nabataean form 'lyt' is *de facto* a pan-Semitic term, and cognate forms are thus to be found in the Semitic milieu,¹⁶ e.g. in East Semitic languages such as Akkadian, as *elītu(m)*, with a similar meaning in Middle Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian.¹⁷ It also occurs in Northwest Semitic, for example in Ugaritic ('ly)¹⁸ and Hebrew *'aliyyah* (עליה),¹⁹ which correspond in the LXX to: *ἀνάβασις*, *προκοπή* and *ὑπερῶον*.²⁰ The term is recorded in Aramaic dialects: Palmyrene 'lyt' (𐩣𐩣𐩪), inscriptional Aramaic 'lyt (עלית),²¹ Biblical Aramaic in the suffix construction *'illitēh* (עליתיה),²² Targum Aramaic 'lyt' (עליתא),²³ Judaeo-Aramaic 'lyt' (עליתא),²⁴ Palestinian Christian Aramaic

Roman and Byzantine Periods (Cambridge, MA - Leipzig: Harvard University Press - Otto Harrassowitz, 1914; reimp. Hildesheim - Zürich - New York: Georg Olms, 1992), p. 1114a.

¹⁴ J.F. Healey, *Aramaic Inscriptions and Documents of the Roman Periods*, p. 117.

¹⁵ See Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala & Joan Ferrer, *Glossary of Nabataean Aramaic. With etymological and comparative notes*. «Semitica Antiqua» 4 (Córdoba: UCOPress, 2017), p. 37b.

¹⁶ Vide J.P. Monferrer-Sala & J. Ferrer, *Glossary of Nabataean Aramaic*, p. 73a.

¹⁷ Wolfram Von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*. 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1965, 1972, 1981; reprinted 1985), I, p. 202a-b; *The Assyrian Dictionary*, ed. in charge A. Leo Oppenheim (Chicago, IL: The Oriental Institute, 2004), IV pp. 98-99.

¹⁸ Gregorio el Olmo Lete & Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*. Third Revised Edition. Translated and edited by Wilfred G.E. Watson. «Handbuch der Orientalistik» 112 (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2015), pp. 157-158.

¹⁹ Vide Ludwig Koehler - Walter Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*. Nueva edición de W. Baumgartner, J.J. Stamm y B. Hartmann, con la ayuda de Z. Ben-Hayyim, E.Y. Kutscher y Ph. Reymond. 2 vols. (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2004), I, p. 787a-b; David J.A. Clines (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. 8 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), VI, p. 421a-b.

²⁰ Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Greek ≈ Hebrew/Aramaic Two-way Index to the Septuagint* (Leuven - Paris - Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2010), pp. 301c-302a.

²¹ Stanley A. Cook, *A Glossary of the Aramaic Inscriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898; reimp. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), p. 92.

²² Franz Rosenthal, *An Aramaic Handbook*. "Porta Linguarum Orientalium" NS X, 4 fosc. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967), I/2, p. 34a.

²³ Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, 2 vols (Jerusalem: Hōreb, s.d. = New York: Pardes House, 1959), II, p.

'lyt' (ܠܝܬ),²⁵ Syriac 'elītō (ܠܝܬܐ),²⁶ as well as in Western Semitic, including Sabaeen 'ly/'lt (ʕlō Xlō)²⁷ and Arabic 'a/u/illiyyah (أعليه).²⁸

The semantic field covered by the term can thus be defined as relating to the concept of height or elevation, as it occurs with Hebrew לַיָּבֵיט (2 Sam 18:33; 2 Kings 1:2) or its plural form לַיָּבֵיטִים (Jer 2:14). The semantic field is in turn bounded by the term byrt' (= τὸ ἱερὸν), so it can be inferred that the author of the inscription is referring to an upper 'room' or 'chamber'. It might usefully be noted in this context that, in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, the 'Last Supper' is reported as taking place in an "upper room".

The two passages run as follows:

a) Mc 14:14-15

ὁ διδάσκαλος λέγει· ποῦ ἐστὶν τὸ κατάλυμά μου ὅπου τὸ πάσχα μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν μου φάγω; καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ μὴνδεῖξίαν ἀνάγει οὐ μὲν ἀέστρωμένον ἔτοιμον

"Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples? He will show you a large room upstairs ready".

b) Lc 22:11-12:

λέγει σοι ὁ διδάσκαλος· ποῦ ἐστὶν τὸ κατάλυμα ὅπου τὸ πάσχα μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν μου φάγω; καὶ ἐν ὄψει ἀνάγει οὐ μὲν ἀέστρωμένον

1082b; Jacob Levy, *Chaldaisches Wörterbuch über die Targumim und einengrossen Theil des rabbinischen Schriftthums*. 2 vols. (Leipzig: Gustav Engel, 1866), II, p. 218a.

²⁴ M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Judean Aramaic* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2003), p. 70b.

²⁵ M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Christian Palestinian Aramaic*. "Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta" 234 (Leuven – Paris – Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2014), p. 310a; Friedrich Schulthess, *Lexicon syropalaestinum* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1903), p. 147a.

²⁶ R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus*, collegerunt Stephanus M. Quatremere et al. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879, 1901), II, cols. 2890-2891; M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN – Piscataway, NJ: Eisenbrauns – Gorgias Press, 2009), pp. 1102b-1103a.

²⁷ Alfred F.L. Beeston, M.A. Ghul, W.W. Müller and J. Ryckmans, *Dictionnairesabéen* (Louvain-la-Neuve – Beirut: Peeters – Librairie du Liban, 1982), p. 16. Cf. Joan Copeland Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic: Sabaeen Dialect*. "Harvard Semitic Studies" 25 (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2004), p. 367.

²⁸ G.W. Freytag, *Lexicon arabico-latinum*. 4 vols. (Halle: C.A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1830, 1833, 1835, 1837), III, p. 217a. Cf. Ethiopicmal'alt (ግለልተ), Wolf Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991), p. 304a.

“The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples? He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished”.

The term used in both texts is ἀνάγαιον (lat. *cænaculum*),²⁹ which in Greek denotes an ‘upper room’.³⁰ Interestingly, the term ἀνάγαιον is rendered in the Pešittā and in the old Syriac Gospels by ܐܠܝܬܐ (*‘elītō*),³¹ also with the sense of ‘upper room’. The fragmentary Syriac *Diatessaron* uses the term ‘*elītō* (ܐܠܝܬܐ),³² which in the Arabic version is translated as ‘*illiyyah* (عليية).³³ Moreover, both Syriac versions add the adjective ܪܒܬܐ; (*rabtā*) to render the Greek μέγα, which itself is clearly intended to denote a large room or chamber.

The idea that this term was used to refer to a large space can also be inferred from the information provided by Ishū‘dad de Merv in his *Commentary*, to the effect that the room (ܪܒܬܐ) served as a church (ܫܘܒܢܐ) and a meeting-house (ܫܘܒܢܐ ܕܥܡܐ):³⁴

²⁹ On this *locum sanctum* in the Gospels and in tradition, see *Enchiridion locorum sanctorum. Documenta S. Evangelii loca respicientia*. Collegit atque adnotavit Donatus Baldi (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1982, 2.^a ed.), pp. 471-531 §§ 728-787.

³⁰ Cf. James Hope Moulton & George Milligan, *The vocabulary of the Greek Testament, illustrated from the papyri and other non-literary sources* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1914-1929), p. 30b; G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 96b.

³¹ P.E. Pusey & G.H. Gwilliam (eds.), *Tetraevangelium Sanctum juxta Simplicem Syrorum versionem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901; reprinted Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003), pp. 290 and 454 respectively; *Evangelion da-Mepharreshe: The Curetonian Version of the Four Gospels*. Edited, collected and arranged by F. Crawford Burkitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), I, pp. 231 and 396 respectively; *The Old Syriac Gospels or Evangelion da-Mepharreshê*. Edited by Agnes Smith Lewis (London: Williams and Norgate, 1910), pp. 113 and 196 respectively. Cf. E. Jan Wilson, *The Old Syriac Gospels: Studies and Comparative Translations*. With Syriac Transcriptions by George A. Kiraz. “Eastern Christian Studies” I-II (Louaize, Lebanon – Piscataway, NJ: The University of Notre Dame – Gorgias Press, 2002), I, p. 361 and II, p. 627 respectively.

³² *Vetus Evangelium Syrorum et excerptum Diatessaron Tatiani*. Edición al cuidado de Ignacio Ortiz de Urbina. “Biblia Políglota Matritense” VI (Madrid. Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1967), pp. 170 and 279 on the text of Mk 14,15.

³³ A.-S. Marmardji, *Diatessaron de Tatien*. Texte arabe établi, traduit en français, collationné avec les anciennes versions syriaques, suivi d’un évangéliste diatessarique syriaque et accompagné de quatre planches hors-texte (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1935), pp. 424 and Agustinus Ciasca, *Tatiani Evangeliorum Harmoniae arabice*. Nunc primum ex duplici codice edit et translatione latina donavit (Roma: Ex Typographia Polyglotta, 18889, p. 169 on the text of Mk 14,15.

³⁴ Cf. *The Commentaries of Isho‘dad of Merv, Bishop of Hadatha (c. 850 A.D.)*, edited and translated by Margaret Dunlop Gibson, with an Introduction by James Rendel Harris. “Horae Semiticae” V-VII (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), III, p. 76 = ‘w (Syr.) and I, p. 195 (Engl. vers.).

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“Now our Lord arranged with the master of the upper room (...) It served the disciples as a church and a meeting-house, until the destruction of Jerusalem”.

The desire to specify that this was a large room is found only in the redactions of the Mark and Luke Gospels; elsewhere, therefore, it would appear that the term was intended to denote a room, without specifying its size; this may also be true of 'lyt' in the Aramaic-Nabataea inscription, although in both cases confirmation can only be sought through archaeological or textual evidence.