

*Original article***DOCUMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO NEWLY DISCOVERED INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE JORDANIAN BADIA**

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**Abstract:**

*This study examines two newly discovered Safaitic inscriptions from the Jordanian Badia, documented during the Badia Epigraphic Survey (BES) field project. It analyzes the verbs *mhr* and *sʿry*, interpreting their meanings within their cultural context. The study outlines the BES project's methodology for documentation and interpretation. It also discusses the inscriptions' relationship to their landscape and the project's role in heritage preservation. The research highlights the importance of collaboration among scholars and institutions in documenting, publishing, and interpreting such inscriptions. Finally, the study argues that making these inscriptions accessible to researchers, will deepen our understanding of pre-Islamic Arab culture and social practices in the Jordanian Badia and surrounding regions.*

**1. Introduction**

The Badia Epigraphic Survey (BES) Project documents and studies inscriptions and rock art in the Jordanian Badia using modern recording methods. It moves beyond simple discovery toward systematic documentation grounded in scientific precision. Launched in 2015, the BES Project responds to the urgent need to document the rich but underexplored epigraphic heritage of the Jordanian Badia using modern scientific methods. This ambitious initiative is co-directed by Michael C. A. Macdonald, a pioneering scholar in ANA inscriptions and co-founder of the OCIANA database, and Ali Al-Manaser. Since 2017, Ahmed Al-Jallad of The Ohio State University has been a key collaborator, playing a crucial role in advancing the project's objectives and enhancing its scholarly impact [1,2]. Together, the BES Project advances the preservation, analysis, and interpretation of one of the most significant epigraphic landscapes in the Jordanian Badia, supporting rigorous documentation and interdisciplinary research. The BES mission is to create a comprehensive contextual record of the Badia's written heritage. The core objectives are clearly defined in numerous project publications [3,4]:

1) *Systematic documentation*: The initial goal is to conduct systematic surveys of basalt desert inscriptions and rock art of all periods. This involves systematically canvassing

huge areas, like regions in the area around the Syrian border which had not been surveyed since the 1950s, to get a complete inventory of the epigraphic landscape [5].

2) *Precision and context*: One of the key goals is to document accurate GPS coordinates for each inscription. This enables each discovery to be located within its precise geographical and archaeological context, an important piece of information lacking in previous studies. This accurate recording is necessary to map the distribution of names, tribes, and gods, gaining indispensable insight into the rich culture of the Badia.

3) *Looking back to the past*: Re-documentation of already recorded inscriptions forms the bulk of this project. The majority of texts were photographed or copied during the 20<sup>th</sup> century before the existence of GPS, and the results include erroneous provenance and occasionally questionable images. The BES aims to return these inscriptions to their original locations, document them using modern technology, and recover their full scientific value.

**2. Methodology**

Documentation preserves accurate information about archaeological sites and inscriptions before they deteriorate or are

lost. Documentation methods include photography, field drawing, 3D scanning, and GIS, which ensure data accuracy and facilitate future analysis. In epigraphic studies, systematic documentation allows researchers to understand the spatial distribution of inscriptions and their relationship to natural and cultural environments. It also contributes to building a reliable knowledge base for comparative studies at regional and international levels. Interpretation conveys the meaning of texts, inscriptions, and artefacts to audiences clearly and effectively. Interpretation often employs the 'interpretive triangle,' which connects the artefact or text, its context, and the audience. This framework emphasizes the importance of considering the backgrounds and interests of the audience, as well as the spatial and temporal context of the inscriptions, to ensure that the conveyed knowledge and cultural messages are accurate, engaging, and meaningful. Recent studies show that integrating precise documentation with theoretical interpretation improves our understanding of heritage [3]. Detailed records allow researchers to conduct accurate analyses of inscriptions, while scholarly interpretation situates these records within their cultural, historical, and social contexts. Thus, an integrated approach connects data collection to analysis and provides deeper insights into inscriptions' symbolic functions and social roles. It also strengthens heritage preservation efforts and facilitates the communication of cultural values to both scholars and the public [6-8].

### 2.1. Documentation, authenticity, and looting

A primary objective of the BES Project is the precise, scientific documentation of inscriptions and rock art [1]. This includes recording typologies, assigning accurate GPS coordinates, and identifying historical and topographical place names. An inscription's geographical context is crucial for proper interpretation; misidentifying or altering its location can lead to inaccurate conclusions about its significance. Unfortunately, numerous cases have been reported in which inscriptions were published with incorrect geographical attributions, creating confusion among scholars particularly when determining tribal names, individual identities, or the geographical extent of specific cultural groups. Such errors may arise from unfamiliarity with regional toponymy or unintentional misplacements, but they can also stem from more concerning practices. Some individuals acquire images of inscriptions from non-specialists or take photographs during unauthorized visits. In an effort to legitimize these activities, they may falsely attribute the inscriptions to locations other than their actual discovery sites. Additionally, the survey team has received reports from residents who previously collaborated with other researchers, revealing instances in which inscriptions were deliberately concealed or stone surfaces were overturned after documentation to prevent subsequent researchers from accessing them. Such unethical actions have led to the irreversible loss of historically significant inscriptions, diminishing the overall integrity of archaeological research. The Badia Epigraphic Survey Project mitigates these challenges through rigorous scientific protocols. All field photographs are systematically accompanied by complete documentation, including high-precision GPS coordinates

and GIS mapping data, ensuring that future researchers can verify and study these inscriptions in situ. Moreover, all documented inscriptions are meticulously integrated into the Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia (OCIANA). Recently transferred to Ohio University, this database serves as a publicly accessible repository, ensuring that inscriptions documented since 2015 are preserved and shared with the global academic community in a scientifically accurate manner.

### 2.2. Looting and the destruction of archaeological sites

During the survey, the team observed extensive evidence of illegal excavations and looting across various areas of the Jordanian Badia. These destructive activities have significantly damaged numerous archaeological sites, particularly burial cairns, Open mosques, and mounded settlement remains. Many of these cairns and stone structures have been dismantled, with their stones repurposed for the construction of modern graves by local communities. The phenomenon of treasure hunting has further exacerbated the destruction of epigraphic and architectural heritage. Motivated by myths of hidden wealth, individuals have caused irreparable damage to ancient sites, often misinterpreting inscriptions as symbols indicating buried treasure. This issue is compounded by a general lack of awareness among local populations regarding the historical and cultural value of these inscriptions. By systematically addressing these challenges, the Badia Epigraphic Survey not only aims to safeguard Jordan's epigraphic heritage but also underscores the necessity of preserving archaeological integrity for future research and cultural understanding.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. BES 2019 and 2020 seasons

The activities for the 2020 season consisted of work focused on the Tell al-Masma area, fig. (1) in the immediate vicinity of the Jordan-Syria border.

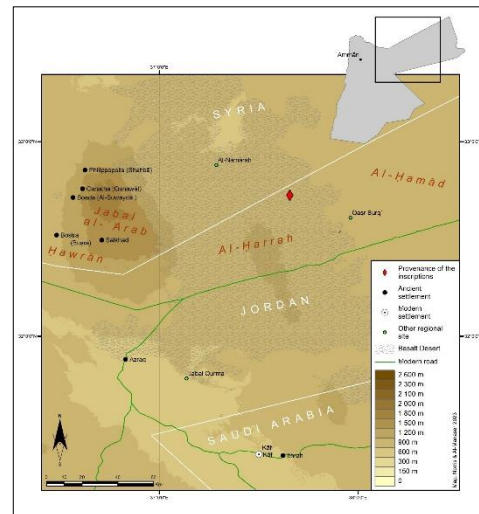


Figure (1) a map of Jordan showing the location of the inscriptions

The site was characterized by a large volcanic hill adjacent to several valleys, Wadi al-Masma al-Sharqi, Wadi al-Masma al-Awsat, and Wadi al-Masma al-Gharbi, as well as a flat

area known as Al-Ghawanem. Additionally, the survey team recorded a variety of inscriptions in the transitional area between al-Harrah and al-Hamad, from the border area to the al-Hudaylat area, where a water dam has been built as part of Jordan's water-harvesting program. The fieldwork yielded rich archaeological remains, with the recovery of many flint tools and pottery sherds. All areas surveyed were systematically recorded, and geographic coordinates provided a precision of documentation. This survey season was memorable for good weather that allowed for comprehensive photographic coverage of survey areas. Additionally, the logistical support from the Jordanian Armed Forces enabled the team to reach areas that would not have been possible without securing government permissions. Unfortunately, continued security concerns led to area prohibitions, especially within border areas, which limited the amount of fieldwork that could be undertaken.

### 3.2. The inscriptions

Two inscriptions will be presented as examples of materials recorded during the BES surveys in 2019 and 2020. These examples were chosen for their uniqueness, as they either represent distinctive objects that provide valuable information or written materials that merit further discussion. However, recent scholarly practice tends to include all inscriptions containing personal names or duplicate texts within specialized databases. This is because such inscriptions do not usually contribute new interpretive information; rather, they are preserved for the sake of precise documentation and for use in statistical studies, particularly those concerned with the distribution of personal names, divine names, tribal names, verbs, and other linguistic or cultural elements. One of the most important aspects of the BES Project is its commitment to preserving all archaeological, written, and inscriptional materials discovered, regardless of their size, form, or character. This approach stems from the Project's view that every find constitutes a component of the local heritage and, as such, must be safeguarded. Whether these materials contain new information or repeat what is already known, they nonetheless stand as evidence of a cultural presence that once existed in the region.

#### 3.2.1. Inscription no. 1, fig. (2)



Figure (2) inscription no. 1

#### ▪ Transliteration

*l tm bn 's' bn hl bn 's'hr w mhr b- h- m'zy wldt b-'tr 'hl –  
h mhr l- h- ġdf h lt s'lm*

#### ▪ Translation

*By Tm son of 's' son of Hl son of 's'hr and he forged  
through with the goats that had given birth, at the traces  
of his family who passed [here] with difficulty towards the  
pasture, and so O Lt [grant] relief*

#### ▪ Commentary

The inscription offers a detailed view of the author's experience as a pastoral nomad in the harsh basalt desert. The verb *mhr* is not fully attested in Safaitic, but its meaning can be approached through classical Arabic examples. In Arabic, *mhr* primarily suggests "to forge through (difficult terrain)" or "to cut through a location with difficulty," as with the related phrases *tamakhkharat al-ibil al-kalā* (تمخرت الابل الكلا) that refer to camels turned themselves towards the pasture [9]. The nuance of *mhr* in Classical Arabic often implies cutting through water (sea) or open terrain with force, not just difficulty. This semantic field suits the inscription, as the author's account emerges from the hardships of travelling and seeking pasture in the Badia. The verb indicates that the author "passed with difficulty, together with the goats that had just given birth." The mention of newborn kids is significant, as stabilizing the herd would slow movement, making moving more difficult. This grounds the inscription in the practicalities of nomadic herding, where the reproductive cycle of livestock shapes mobility and sustainability. As he traveled through the landscape, the author wrote that he "[found] the traces of his family" ('tr 'hl-h). This phrase ('tr 'hl-h) can be understood as traces left visible in the landscape by family members. They had recently traversed this route, and by following in their footprints, he places his movement in a broader context of migration with family and kin; it makes visible the social and familial aspects of mobility in the Badia [10]. When the author notes that his family 'too had crossed with difficulty,' he emphasizes the hardship that marked this journey. The destination of the author's trajectory is identified as Ġdf. While the referent is not precisely defined, it likely refers to a known pasture area characterized by trees near water, which offer shade and the prospect of pasture for animals. The word Ġdf is used to describe the presence of trees near water, which offer shade and the prospect of pasture for animals. Even today, certain places in the Jordanian Badia where trees occur have retained the name al-Ġadaf. It follows that Ġadaf from the inscription may describe a pasture or well-watered area sought out by pastoralists during seasonal migration. The place-name also anchors the author's movement within the ecological logic of nomadic life, a constant search for pasture and water. The last sentence reads, *f h-'lt s'lm* "So, O Allāt, grant (him) peace". The appeal to Allāt, a common theme in Safaitic inscriptions, links the writer's daily hardships, pastoral economy, and divine protection. After describing the burden of travel, the newborn herd, the family trails, and the hope for pasture, the writer appeals to a higher power for safety and well-being. This inscription is not merely a record of movement but a constructed narrative of pastoral existence. It brings meaning to the burden of travelling with newborn livestock, utilizing family tracks through the desert to deliberately access pasture areas, illustrating the ecological properties of pastures like Ġdf, and concluding the inscription with a ha-

bitual, religiously sanctioned appeal to Allāt. The inscription provides valuable insights on pastoral mobility, movement, and the search for pasture.

### 3.2.2. Inscription no. 2, fig. (3)



Figure (3) inscription no. 2

#### ▪ Transliteration

[m l] bn 'md w s<sup>2</sup>ry h-gml mn s<sup>2</sup>l b- 'rb 'n

#### ▪ Translation

[M l] son of 'md and he purchased the camel from S<sup>2</sup>l for forty

#### ▪ Commentary

The rock bears two Safaitic inscriptions, one near the center and one on the rim, along with several pictorial motifs. A camel occupies the centre of the composition. Human fighting scene: Two anthropomorphic figures are depicted below the camel in combat, schematically and linearly drawn. One of the figures holds a small round shield, and the other a short sword and a round shield. The repetition of this combat scene at the end of the inscription suggests a deliberate thematic emphasis on armed conflict or single combat, possibly highlighting the martial values of the commemorated individuals. The stone is broken, which caused the loss of part of the first inscription. The relationship between the purchase text and the combat scene is unclear; they may be unrelated or thematically linked through status display. Some of the edges of the letters that could form the first name are visible, but the rest of the inscription is clearly readable. The two inscriptions focus on the camel. The first inscription mentions the purchase of the camel, and the second inscription confirms its ownership. The camel is a major and common element in the rock art of the Jordanian Badia, often appearing alongside Safaitic inscriptions [11]. The first inscription appears to conform to the conventional Safaitic structure, beginning with a genealogical statement. The author subsequently records the purchase of a camel, which may correspond to an associated drawing attributed to an individual named S<sup>2</sup>l. The text refers to the figure “forty,” though its precise significance whether monetary or material remains unclear. Safaitic inscriptions frequently mention transactions involving the purchase of animals, most commonly horses and camels, yet the unit of value is rarely defined. In one notable example, the owner states that he purchased a horse for twenty minas. Although the mina is a well-known unit of weight and currency across Near Eastern historical and archaeological records, its equivalence in practical economic terms during the period of this

inscription remains uncertain. It is unclear whether the mina in this context was a standardized currency, a symbolic unit, or a local measure of value, which complicates our understanding of the economy. Comparable Safaitic inscriptions provide valuable context for interpreting this reference. For instance: One text record that Ġt son of Ms'k purchased a horse from Mlk for twenty minas [12]. Another inscription documents Š'd son of Ġt buying a horse from his brother for one hundred (units) [13]. A third inscription notes that Znn son of {Wdm} bought a she-camel from his brother for one hundred (units), also expressing longing for his family [14]. In yet another case, T'l son of Mgyr purchased a male camel from Ldn for one hundred, invoking divine punishment for anyone who might efface the text [15]. These examples illustrate that transactions involving camels and horses were commonly recorded in Safaitic inscriptions, underscoring the animals' central role in the life of the pre-Islamic nomads of the southern Syrian and Jordanian Badia. The variation in recorded values whether twenty minas, one hundred units, or the ambiguous “forty” suggests that different animals carried different levels of prestige and worth. Horses, in particular, seem to have been considered more valuable, possibly due to their rarity and association with status and mobility. These inscriptions suggest that livestock transactions formed part of the economic activities of nomadic groups. The camel purchased “for forty” thus fits into a broader cultural and economic pattern visible in Safaitic inscriptions, offering a rare glimpse into the transactions and values of desert societies living among the basalt landscapes of the Badia. The absence of a specified unit (e.g., mnh, qyt, dīnār) suggests that ‘forty’ may have been a conventional number or referred to a locally understood measure, possibly camels themselves as a unit of value.

## 4. Discussion

The verbs *mhr* (“to forge through with difficulty”) and *s<sup>2</sup>ry* (“to purchase”) both provide valuable insights into the socio-cultural world of Safaitic inscriptions. The verb *mhr* reflects the difficulties of movement and herding in the basalt desert, where mobility was constrained by both the natural environment and livestock reproductive cycles. The verb also appears to convey the author's personal experience of movement through a difficult environment. The verb *s<sup>2</sup>ry* indicates an economic transaction, though the specific unit of value remains unclear. In this case, *s<sup>2</sup>ry* appears with the value 'forty' for a camel purchase, suggesting a structured transaction, though the unit of value is unspecified. The use of *mhr* and *s<sup>2</sup>ry* shows that Safaitic inscriptions are not mere graffiti but records of daily life, emotions, and social relations. Furthermore, these inscriptions show that “Safaitic tribes” engaged in economic exchanges and that the inscriptions articulated both individual and communal values.

## 5. Conclusion

*Systematic recording and interpretation of Safaitic inscriptions have built a clearer picture of pre-Islamic communities in the Jordanian Badia. These inscriptions are not mere graffiti but records of lived experiences, including movements, struggles, and social relations.*

The verbs *mḥr* (“to pass with difficulty”) and *s<sup>2</sup>ry* (“to purchase”) are particularly revealing. The former captures the physical hardship of navigating the harsh basalt landscape with newborn livestock. The latter reflects a structured economy in which camels held significant value, though the specific unit of currency often remains unclear. These verbs illustrate recurring social and economic practices among Safaitic tribes, including mobility, herding, and commercial transactions. The Badia Epigraphic Survey has documented a large body of inscriptions with precision, providing scholars unprecedented access to the language and culture of the region. Continued documentation and analysis will further improve our understanding of these desert societies and their place within the broader cultural networks of the ancient Levant.

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