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## South Arabian inscriptions from the Farasān Islands (Saudi Arabia) (poster)

SOLÈNE MARION DE PROCÉ & CARL PHILLIPS

### Summary

A few years ago the study of a Latin inscription found on Farasān Island was published in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* (2004). Prior to this, the only inscription known from Farasān was a fragmentary South Arabian inscription published in the journal *Atlat* (1981). As a result of further surveys of the island several more South Arabian inscriptions have now been recorded. All of the inscriptions are very short, or incomplete, and often heavily eroded. The legible inscriptions appear to show mainly personal names. The inscriptions and suggested readings are presented along with a description of the sites where they were found, where such evidence is available. The possible dates for the inscriptions are considered alongside supporting archaeological evidence. Finally, the evidence that the inscriptions provide for South Arabians on Farasān will be discussed in relation to historical developments on the adjacent mainland and southern Red Sea coast from the early first millennium BC to the first few centuries AD.

**Keywords:** Farasān Islands, epigraphy, South Arabian, Latin, inscriptions

### Introduction

A few years ago a Latin inscription found on Farasān Island was published in *PSAS* (Phillips, Villeneuve & Facey 2004: 239–250). Prior to this a fragmentary South Arabian inscription published in *Atlat* (Zarins, Murad & Al-Yish 1981: 9–42) was the only inscription known from Farasān. A second Latin inscription has since been found and, as a result of further surveys of the islands (Nehmé & Villeneuve [n.d.]), more South Arabian inscriptions have been recorded, some of which had only been mentioned previously by Miftāḥ (1990; 2003). The inscriptions are short, incomplete, or heavily eroded. The legible content of the inscriptions appears to be personal names as well as the name of the South Arabian deity, Athtar, in one of them.

The inscriptions and preliminary readings are presented below with a description of the contexts (where such evidence is available). The possible dates for the inscriptions are considered alongside supporting archaeological and epigraphic evidence. Finally, the evidence that the inscriptions provide for South Arabians on Farasān is discussed in relation to historical developments on the adjacent mainland and southern Red Sea coast from the early first millennium BC to the first few centuries AD. The Farasān Islands (Fig. 1) are located approximately 60 km west of Jizān off the southern Red Sea coast of Arabia.

One of the Latin inscriptions found on Farasān commemorates the dedication of a monument to the Emperor Antoninus Pius, built on Farasān (*Ferresan*), probably in AD 144/145, by a detachment of the *II Traiana Fortis* and its auxiliaries. The dedicator is a prefect of the *Portus Ferresan* and of the “Sea of Hercules” (much more likely than “the Bridge of Hercules”).

The second Latin inscription is fragmentary and probably comprised four lines with the end of lines 3 and 4 being all that has survived. This fragment of text possibly mentions a *Legio VI Ferrata*, which would date the inscription to c. AD 120, thus approximately a quarter of a century earlier than the first inscription.

Prior to the discovery of these Latin inscriptions the earliest historical references to Farasān date from the sixth century AD.

Once again, the strategic location of Farasān is implied in the Greek *Martyrium Arethae* where it is reported how Farasān (*Farsan*) contributed seven ships to the Ethiopian fleet sent in a bid to halt the persecution of Christians in Najrān (“The Martyrs of Najrān”) in about 525. Incidentally, around this time, Nannosos, the Byzantine ambassador sent by Justinian (527–565) to the King of Axum, also visited Farasān and provided a description of its inhabitants (Photius/ed. Henry 1959). There is also a South Arabian inscription (Ja 1028, see Robin 1995: 230) mentioning both Farasānites (*Frs'nyt-m*) and Farasān

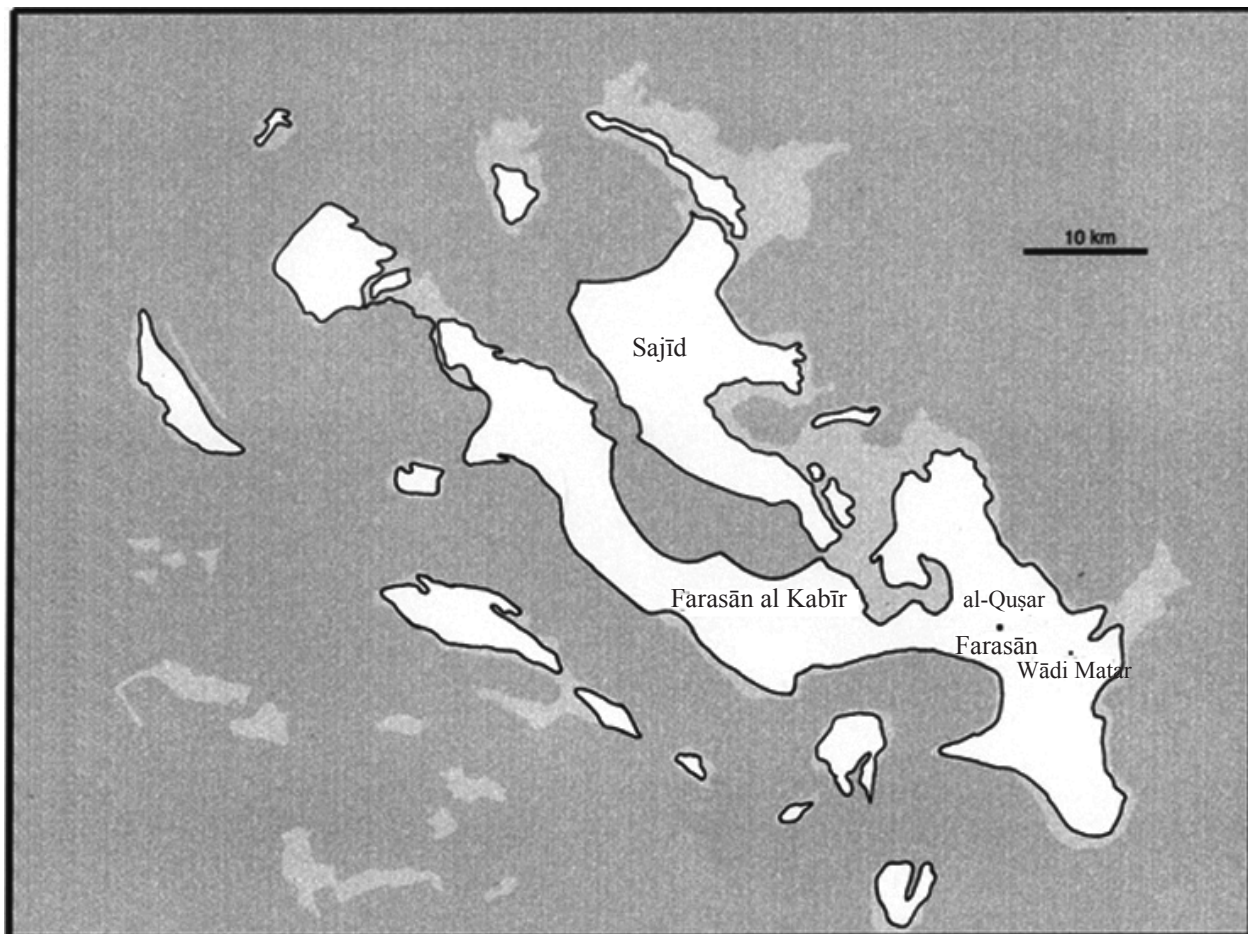


FIGURE 1. Main map of the Farasān archipelago (Saudi Arabia).

(*Frs'n*) when describing events in the neighbourhood of al-Mukhā.

Farasān seems to have occasionally played an important role in the history of this part of the Red Sea. It is hoped the inscriptions presented here and consideration of their contexts will provide further insight into the history of Farasān and its connections with South Arabia.

### Qusār

One of the two Latin inscriptions (the smallest) was found at Qusār, approximately 5 km south-east of Farasān city on the main island. This site was previously occupied by a village that was abandoned in 1975. Many limestone blocks were reused in the recent building including capitals and columns. An ashlar block was reused and cut to form a semi-circular arch, which bears a South Arabian inscription (Fig. 2/a).

There were possibly two inscriptions: the upper inscription comprising four lines, and beneath this is a two-line inscription. The letters in the lower inscription are noticeably larger than the upper one but the style of the letters is similar.

The inscription is eroded and the remodelling of the block has cut away a large part of the text. It is possible, however, to identify a number of personal names. The suggested reading of the inscription is as follows:

1. /yhz
2. /lhy
3. /'
4. /bn
- SPACE
5. /bn/m
6. ywm

FIGURE 2. Ancient South Arabian inscriptions from the Farasān Islands.



It is possible that *yhz* in line 1 represents the beginning of a name such as *Yhzhm* (Harding 1971: 689). Likewise, *lhy* in line 2 might be the beginning of a common name or simply the name *Lhy* which is known from a Sabaic inscription (Wāqir 1) found at Wāqir, a site in Wādī Sihām, on the Yemeni Tihāmah (Beeston 2005: 48–49).

It should be noted that the South Arabian inscription published by Zarins, Murad and Al-Yish (photographed by W. Facey) was also found at Qusār. This fragmentary inscription is also eroded. It is, however, possible that the name *'dn* occurs in the lower line of the inscription (Fig. 2/b).

### Khutūb (Khaṭīb)

On Sajīd Island is the village of Khutūb. There is no clear pre-Islamic site there but there is a cemetery, to the north-west of the village, where ancient carved blocks have been reused. Among these reused blocks an almost complete South Arabian inscription was found some years ago by Ibrahim Miṭṭāḥ (Fig. 2/c). The inscription comprises four lines, the first three of which are completely legible. Most of the fourth line is missing. The inscription comprises a list of names:

1. *gldm/w'ls<sup>2</sup>*
2. *rh/w'n'm/*
3. *wdlwn/wmr*
4. *hr*

Alternatives that have been suggested for the first name in line 1 are *Mgdm* and *Mldm*. The value of the first letter is misleading because of a small fissure in the stone, which gives the appearance of it being an M. On closer inspection, it appears more likely to be G. The horizontal line of the letter that follows is definitely sloping and is most likely L. The name is, therefore, *Gldm*.

The second name on lines 1 and 2, *'ls<sup>2</sup>rh*, is well known throughout South Arabia. The second name on line 2 appears to be *'n'm*. This name is common in Safaitic (also known from Minaic and Sabaic inscriptions, Harding 1971: 80).

The first name on line 3 is clearly *Dlwn*. This name is also known from a Sabaic inscription (1971: 242). Unfortunately, the other names are partially missing.

### Wādī Maṭar

In the south-western part of Farasān al-Kabīr, in Wādī Maṭar, there are several archaeological sites close to one another. They were first surveyed by a team led by J. Zarins in 1980 (Zarins, Murad & Al-Yish 1981: 9–42).

The foundations of buildings are visible and it was also observed that some of the monolithic door jambs have short South Arabian inscriptions on them (Fig. 2/d).

An early publication by Miftāḥ (1990) includes a photograph of an inscription which it appears safe to conclude was found in the vicinity of the Wādī Maṭar sites (Wādī Maṭar 1 & Wādī Maṭar 2). In this inscription two lines are visible (Fig. 2/e). In the upper line the only word that can be read is the verb *hqny* — to dedicate. On the second line it is possible to read *bn/qwdm/ʿttr*. The inscription appears, therefore, to record a dedication to the South Arabian deity Athtar. It is also important to note that this inscription is written boustrophedon unlike the inscriptions found at Qusār and Khutūb.

### The date of the inscriptions

The inscriptions from Wādī Maṭar provide a baseline for dating the South Arabian inscriptions from Farasān. The palaeography of the inscription mentioning Athtar, written boustrophedon, is clearly archaic. The inscription can be dated, therefore, to the first half of the first millennium BC and the “*mukarrib* period”, and could even be dated to the fifth or fourth century BC, at the very end of the archaic period. It is worth mentioning that there is only one other inscription from the Tihāmah, which mentions Athtar (from Wāqir, also boustrophedon and similar letter forms, see Beeston 2005: 49–50). We obviously cannot relate them to one another and settle on a date based on palaeography but we can, nevertheless, acknowledge the similarities between the two inscriptions. Moreover, the pottery from the Wādī Maṭar sites can also be compared with pottery from sites located on the Tihāmah such as Salīf, al-Ḥāmid, and Wāqir that has been dated to the first half of the first millennium BC (Phillips 2005).

The inscriptions from Qusār and Khutūb are clearly much later. It is tempting to say that they could be contemporary with the second century AD Roman occupation of the site, thus representing the local component of the island’s occupants at this time. It is possible, however, that these inscriptions are slightly earlier (not later) in date and that some of the inscribed characters were reworked and reused during the Roman presence.

### Historical and geographical contexts

The early South Arabian presence on Farasān during the first half of the first millennium BC is not surprising: the islands probably provided a point of embarkation to the

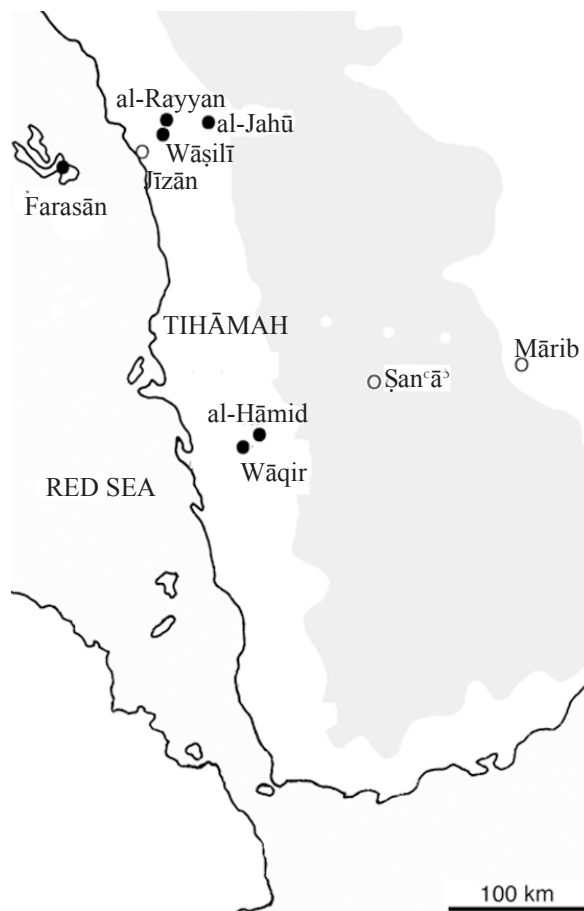


FIGURE 3. A map of ancient sites mentioned in the Tihāmah (Saudi Arabia).

other side of the Red Sea where comparable South Arabian inscriptions are known from sites in Eritrea and Ethiopia. The evidence thus complements the information gathered from further south on the Tihāmah at sites such as al-Ḥāmid and Wāqir (Fig. 3). Archaic inscriptions reported from that region have content and letter forms that are comparable with those found elsewhere in South Arabia, and the synchronisms are based not just on palaeography but also on dated contexts, inclusion of royal names, etc.

Similarly, given what is known of Roman and local trade in the Red Sea at this time, a South Arabian presence is to be expected on the Farasān Islands during the first and second centuries AD — as described, for example, in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* — although no mention is made of Farasān itself. Moreover, the names mentioned in the inscriptions from Qusār and Khutūb are well-known South Arabian names. There is not yet, however, any conclusive archaeological or epigraphic

evidence for occupation of the Farasān Islands during the latter half of the first millennium BC.

Finally, alongside the Farasān Islands, it is appropriate to mention the South Arabian inscriptions found on the adjacent mainland, in the hinterland of Jizān. At al-Wāsīlī, a village located 18 km east of Jizān, a short funerary inscription was reported. The text (Ry 518 = Philby 391) comprises only a personal name, *Lb n bn | Wdd L*, inscribed on a coral block that forms part of a tomb. H.St J. Philby communicated details about it to G. Ryckmans. It is interesting to note the close proximity of al-Wāsīlī to al-Rayyan where Zarins, Murad and Al-Yish have since recorded a pre-Islamic site, site 217–103, which they consider to be characteristic of “formal South Arabic sites” (1981: 26). Unfortunately, nothing more precise is mentioned in the text about the dates or characteristics of the sites. More recently, rock inscriptions have been reported in the foothills of Wādī Ḍamad, near al-Juhū, at a site known as al-Maktūb. The site is said to have

“Southern Musnad inscriptions” but, unfortunately, none have been illustrated.

## Conclusion

The South Arabian inscriptions from Farasān are only tantalising fragments of its past. However, viewed as archaeological objects as well as written sources, they provide some indication of when the islands were occupied and by whom. The evidence provided by them also enables Farasān to be integrated into the broader picture of pre-Islamic occupation along the southern shores of the Red Sea.

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