A Study of the Monetary Word "BLṬT" in Old South Arabian Inscriptions in the Light of Akkadian and Assyrian Economic Documents

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Abstract

This paper discusses the word "blṭt" as one of the monetary terms in Old South Arabian Inscriptions in light of Akkadian and Assyrian economic documents. This paper also introduces the different views of scholars on the origin and signs and derivations of the word especially because linguistic clues to the word are still odd. Another mysterious issue related to the word is the way in which this word was transferred to other Old South Arabian languages and its different derivations.

Keywords: Blṭṭ, Coins, Inscriptions, Old South Arabia, Akkadian, Assyrian.

Introduction:

The earliest record of the word "blṭṭ" in old south Arabian inscriptions dated back to the Middle Sabaean period (Between the 3rd century BC and the 3rd century AD). The emphatic letter (ṭ) appeared, together with this word on some wooden Old South Arabian inscriptions. The Sabaean coins known as "blṭṭ" were uncovered in Al-Jawf area in north Yemen were dated to the period between 380 and 350 BC (Huth 2010: 89).

The word "blṭṭ" referring to a coin was mentioned in about twenty Sabaean monumental “Musnad” inscriptions, twenty five minuscule Sabaean “Zaburian” inscriptions1, and two Minaean minuscule inscriptions (Stein 2010, 317), and recently mentioned in two Sabaean and one Minaean minuscule inscriptions (Faqʻas 2013,nos 6, 18, 5).

It was written together with adjectives like ṛḏym in the meaning of the word "complete, good coin" and mšʾm in the meaning of the word "fresh-minted, newly issued" (CIH 376/4) and nʾmt in the meaning of "full value" (Jamme 1976, no. 2855).

1 The term “Zaburian” refers to the Sabaean wooden inscriptions.
A similar thing can be found in the expression dīnār ʾahraš which means "coarse dīnār". This is also an indication of a newly produced coin (Al Šaʾeedī and Mūsā 1929: 785).

"Blṭ" in Akkadian Texts:

The word "blṭ" has already been recorded in Assyrian and Babylonian texts related to agriculture, and was then transferred to Old South Arabian Inscriptions through the hegemony of the Babylonian king Nabonidus (Nabû-naʾīd) on Tayma and other Arabian cities located on the ancient caravan spice road in Southern Arabia. The commercial relations go back to as early as the first millennium BC. The Akkadian texts revealed a lot about active commercial relations with Arabian Peninsula. The Jarhāʾ city located on the Arabian Gulf was one of the most famous commercial centers in the world in the 3rd century BC. This also emphasizes the significance of the Arabian Gulf in commerce and the relations between Southern Arabia and Mesopotamia (Al-Hāšimī 1985, 201-202, 212).

The Assyrian annals 733-732 BC refer to two names of Sabean rulers "Mukarribī Sabaʾ" and they were "yṯʾmrbyn" and "krbʾl" who ruled in a late period of 8th and beginning of 7th centuries BC The first appearance of these Sabaeans names was in a cuneiform text dated to 760 BC and which was talking about Sabaeans caravan travelling toward the Middle Euphrates Area (Ismāʾīl 2005: 59).

The trilateral root of the word "b-l-t" was represented in a number of Mesopotamian texts in some commercial texts related to promising a vow and in some legal texts. The legal texts contained the verb "balāṭum" which means "come to life". This is a term used in commercial activities in different formulas like "balāṭu" means "credit voucher", "ballūṭu" means "deposited a certain amount of money", "ib-la-ṭaṭ-ma" means "letter of credit" and "ba-la-a-ṭim" means "supplies" (CAD, vol. 2, B: 52-58).

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2 Some of the Akkadian names like Sanballāṭ, Bālāṭu, Bullūṭ, and Bulluṭaia which meant god gave life were used in texts related to coins. The Aramaic word "blṭ" which was inscribed on some coins was interpreted so based on Akkadian texts (Bron et Lemaire 1955: 47-48).
We can possibly rely on the content of the trilateral root *b-l-t* mentioned in Akkadian idiomatic to understand the same expression in South Arabia with minuscule/Zaburian word recorded in economic context. Therefore, sending money was used in a context where the correspondent supports the recipients with money, therefore the sender props them up: [lmnyt/ wklbt/ wzdlṭ/ tmlṭ /wly3/ lthynw/ w’n/ lkm/ mšt/ mkb/ blṭn/ ṭhbt/ bmyrn], "For Mnyt and Klbt and Zdlṭ in the presence of Tmlṭ, the protected person, in favor to live, and I am for you, I sent/ drove mkb “weight-pieces/value” of money called *blṭn* that is enough to cereal crops" (Faqʾas 2013, No 6/ 1-2).

In one Middle Assyrian text the word "*bullūṭum*" was used in commercial context to mean "to guess the value of or: Assets, and credit balance. This was an evidence of using the word in financial contexts (Veenhof 1987: 49-51). The term *ina pa-la-aṭутtēršu* meaning "he returns (the silver borrowed), in the sense of payment of a loan" was stated in Middle Babylonian texts (CAD, vol. 2, B: 51).

In regard to the context of promising vows, the old Babylonian texts used the word in question in the phrase *dannūtu šalmūtu bal-[tu-tu]* to refer to the meaning of “loyalty by offering vow” (CAD, vol. 2, B: 68-69; Veenhof 1987: 55, 56). In legal texts the expression *la ba-la-t-suīqūmazi-tim-šuikkisu* was used to mean "to condemn" (CAD, vol.2, B: 51).

In regard with attributing the word to Akkadian origin, we would like to refer to the word *bōlēṭ* recorded in Talmudic and Aramaic texts to mean "stamp, impression" and in this sense it is related to the word *blt* the core of our study in meaning and derivations (see Beeston 1937: 12; Irvine 1964: 20).

The word *blt* with normal *t* was used in Aramaic language to mean: "type of taxes" (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1955: 167), and we compare here the Aramaic word "*blt*" with *bltt* in Sabaean minuscule inscriptions (X. BSB 59/1-2) as a kind of coins that might have taken its name from Aramaic. But Stein compared this word to that of the Geʾezian *balaṭa* which means "chop meat into small pieces", and in this way gives the

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3 Faqʾas believed that the term (*wly*) consisted of *w*:- conjunctive, *l*:- preposition and *y*:- singular first personal pronoun, he based his argument on the expression [w’nltk], i.e."I am for you". This appeared in the 2nd line of the inscription. The context here is inappropriate, and we consider it as a word derived from the root *w- l-y* meaning "protected person, client of clan" (Beeston et al 1982: 160).
The implication that it was used for a coin. This gives the meaning of "half, small piece". It is similar to a Sabaean coins (Stein 2010: 317).

The word bōlēṭ appeared in the period between the 4th century and 1st century BC (Post-Biblical Hebrew) to mean "production, clear, remarkable" (Klein 1987: 66). It should be noted here that the French word bulletin and the Italian word balletino which are used to mean "cash receipt, seal, papers certified with seal "might have originated from the Semitic word bīl (Klein 1987:66).

**The Concept of "BLṬ" in Old South Arabian Languages:**

Bron and Lemaire, and Stein presented the etymology and the history of the word blṭ in Old South Arabian Inscriptions referring to a coin. They used "prominent, cut in relief" or “flat piece” to attribute to the contextual occurrence in some coins, otherwise it shows a monetary system, since coins have some prominent like the wreath, crown of the head.

There are some other scholars who refuse this assumption since no coins from Old South Arabian with the word blṭ has been recovered. They also rejected the idea that it came from the Greek word Παλλάς4 which occurred on some Greek coins. In fact, it occurred only one time in a poem by Eubullus in the 4th century BC. In addition to this, it is not related to the Arabic word Balṭ5 which comes originally from Greek πλατία (Bron et Lemaire 1995:54-55; Stein 2010: 318).

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4 Some scholars have said that the word came through the Phoenician and Greek traders and it is close to the Greek word Παλλάδ "Pallades" (see Irvine 1964: 22-23; Biella 1982: 43-44; Beeston 1994:41, Rykmans, Mueller and Abdallah 1994: 45). This view is based on the similarity of Sabaean letters b and t to those of Greek π and δ (Jamme 1976:128).

5 The word blṭ in old South Arabian inscriptions was compared to the word zalaṭa which is still in use today in Yemen (Barakāt 2003: 3027) and the word zalṭah is a coin equaling 1% of Yemeni Riyal. There are also some Yemeni expressions used in this regard like: la tīglądish min zalat which means "don’t bother yourself from paying money". A second expression: "nīğbat'alaika z-zalat" means "your money was spent", šāḥibu zalat is another expression meaning "a rich person" (Piamenta 1990: 204). A. Jamme connected the word blṭ to balāṭ in Arabic (1976: 132). The word ḥajar was inscribed on a bronze mass used as weight tool in Old South Arabia (Beeston et. al 1982: CIH 935, 67).
Frantsouzoff (2016: 87) shows the etymology of this term is still unclear despite many hypotheses are given by the scholars. However, the discovery of hundreds of wooden inscriptions gives us a slightly clearer picture.

In the light of discovering the wooden inscriptions, Stein thinks that the word blṭṭ did not appear in early Sabaean period and it was a part of the monetary system in Middle Sabaean period. He says it equals three times the unit nisf "half" which used to have the symbol "N". Therefore, it has the same value of three metal coins tridrachm. He also believes that the word blṭṭ could not have originated from Semitic languages. According to him it has no indications in Sabaean language and its occurrence in other Semitic languages is still mysterious. Thus he thinks this word might have been inherited from foreign languages (Stein 2010: 307-318).

According to Irvine, the word blṭ was frequently used and on daily basis in South Arabia (1964: 22-24). It was standard placed to a standard piece of coin. Therefore he compared it with the Latin word nummus which equals quarter of dīnār (sesterces).

The Contextual Usage of the Word "BLṬṬ" in South Arabian Inscriptions

1. Economic Context:

The Old South Arabian inscriptions did not state the exact purchase value of the word blṭṭ. The inscriptions only mentioned the total amount of the price including profit: [kl/blṭṭ/ml/ w-rbh] (Höfner 1981: 12, no GL 1200/7; Bron 1992: 57). Some inscriptions stated the value of the goods sold in return for the unit blṭṭ (Bron et Lemaire 1995: 57).

Some of the inscriptions including this word occurred in agricultural contexts. For example, the coin blṭṭm was used to identify the value of the harvest of wheat crop which was promised to them by god from alluvial valley: [ṣfṭ/hw/ ḏbw/ kwn/ myyn/ ṭm/ brm/ ḏhbn/ blṭṭm/ ṭym] (CIH 73/7-9). The word blṭ was used to refer to a certain payment given in return for cultivation of certain crops in the side of the valley gifted to people by god ḡmr to ḩbcly: [blṭ/ ḍdy/ ḍly/ wyḥfr/ bn/ ḍrḥ/ ṭhlk/ mr/ bn/ ḍnrtn/ ḡmrṭt/ ḍrḥ/ bn/ yd/ b/ ḍrd/ wʾbrt/ ḡbrd/ ḡbrd/ ḡbrd/ ḡbrd/ ḡbrd/ ḡbrd/ ḡbrd/ ḡbrd/ ḡbrd] (CIH 376/ 4-8).6

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6 This inscription is from the city of Śirwāḥ and dated to 200 BC (Irvine 1964: 19).
It was also used in an inscription presenting financial bond for a women: [.... gdjd/ bt/ bn/ ḡwṭm/ ḡqḥm/ wṭṭy/ blṭmn/ rdy...] (Faqṣ as 2013, No 18/1-2), financial receipt given in return for “bnm” a kind of tree-plant such as storax perfume (frankincense) products: [sḥdtk/ sknm/ ḡg nk/ bn/ str/ krḥm/ ḡt/ s’k/ bšt/ f’rḥ/ s’k/ hn/ sḥdtk/ myṛr/ ḡdhń/ bklnhw/ ymtr/ bnm/ blṭmn7] (Faqṣ as 2013, No 5/2-4), and in context of pledge mentions coin blṭn in place of barley: [whn/ ḡ’d/ nmyṛ/ ḡrb/ šrt/ s’f t/ ḡ’w/ ḡhn/ ws1f t/ blṭn8] (Faqṣ as 2013, No 6/5-6).

In the same context coin was used in return for the agricultural crop (Ryckmans, Müeller and Abdallah 1994: 44, no. YM 11743). The word was also used in a document for estimating the price of a piece of a land (RES 4756/3) and settling the account of the debt, and estimating the amount of property tax (RES 4772), and as a payment for those having the same authority-status as the qayṣ/s/ member of the leading clan in tribe in return for accomplishing a mission. It was also mentioned in paying a ransom (Jamme 1976, no 2855; Ghul-Marib 2/3-5 in Bron 1992).

The word blṭ had the phase of declaration was used in paying debt document: [1. ḡkr/ ḡbym/ f’fn/ kr/ kwbhw/ ws’b’nhw/ 2. wwyñhw/ s’w c ...3. kl/ blṭt/ b’lm/ wṣntm/ ḡml’h/ štv/ 4. blṭm/ ḡ/ rdy], 1. The declaration of Zbym/ F’fn that indeed occurred when he offered and paid over money 2. and fulfilled an obligation for ‘s’w c .... 3. every currency of blṭm under the authority of binding-constraining document, having thirty currency of blṭm/ good-complete coin (Ryckmans 1952: 20, no. fa 30).

2. Religious Context

This word was represented in three religious texts. In one of the texts the word was used to refer to a fine imposed over a guilty person accused of bad mouthing in a holy place (Nāmī 1943, no. 74). In another text, the word "blṭm" was used to a person who was caught using a holy pool belonging to the god "nwšm" (Robin et Ryckmans 1978: 7

These lines carry the sense of writing two fantail documents-cheques in favor of “bnm” a kind of crops or other kind of tree-plant, mentioning the kind of coins blṭ as a price of the crops.

8 When you return, we sold-measured you (as value of) fourteen pieces of coins s’l t of the kind of blṭn, or give an equivalent amount of guarantee ransom accepted as an equivalent of that to be as guarantee, otherwise (when you return we give you the price of the food which equal fourteen pieces of coins blṭn).
45-46; Mazzini 2005: 95-123; Stein 2010: 304). The third text was talking about a statue made of silver equaling seven hundred "blṭm" dedicated to the god ʾlmqh (Ja 624/4-5).

Evidences of "BLṬT" in South Arabian Inscriptions

First: It was used as undescribed coin in the following inscriptions:


   Translation: 12. Anyone who brought livestocks into it “the pool” 13. Or left “the livestocks” in it 14. in the following days, one should be punished with a fine equaling five "blṭm" 15. for “each” occasion.

2. Inscription (Nāmī 1943, no. 74/13-14): [wʾ Ṝḏ bbn/ ṣḥbyblṭ].

   Translation: To impose a fine of twenty pieces “of the coin blṭ”.


   Translation: 4. He offered to the god ʾlmqhʾḥwn the master of the temple, a statue which was made of silver of the value of “equaling” seven hundred blṭm.

4. Inscription (Faqcās 2013, 5 =Y 19410): [5. ʾytn/ ṛnmbblṭtn].

   Translation: he buys the bushel of storax perfume (frankincense) by two pieces of the coin "blṭ".

5. A sherd of Minaean inscription (Gnoli 1993: 88-89, no 13/2): [...(b)ʾ sʾ blṭ/ ...].

   Translation: [...(b)ʾ sʾ coinblṭ/ ...].

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The inscription talks about a rule preventing some groups of people such as people of Ḍrm and Mrṭ and tribe of Mḍrn, either those men who carrying weapons or not, and their subjects. Preventing them to build wall-stones around the pool that belongs to “god” Nšwn”, and preventing them to water the livestock or to get wash. Anyone who watered the cows or the asses or sheep, he should scarify male-livestocks to the god “Ṭʾlb”, and scarify female-livestocks to the god “Nšwn”. And anyone who rejects the term of watering the livestocks, he will buy from the god “Nšwn”. And who gets wash in the pool, he will get laying down five times in the place. And who brings the livestocks or leave them, or occurred the deed in the future, he will pay fine five coins of blṭ per occasion.
6. Inscription (Faq‘as 2013, no. 6): [5. *wbhn/ t’d/ ʾwrđ/ qnt/ ʾsr/ whn/ t’d/ nmyr/ 6. *rbś/ ʾsr/ s’T/t/ ʾw/ rhn/ ws’T/t/ bhtdocs]. Translation: 5. When you return, bring a bushel of barley and when you return we will sell you “give you” food. 6. in the value price of fourteen "s’T" (coin) or mortgage or the coin of "bhtdocs".

**Second:** Błt appears as a describing coin with “rḍym”, “ḥy’ltym”, “n’mtm” and “wrq”.


Translation: Gdgd daughter of ġwṯm, half and two good-complete coin blṭm.


Translation: A thousand good-complete Hyʾltym coins.


Translation: ḽkrb son of Yqdmʾl son of ʾnnn paid and fulfilled a duty to the administrators of Šīrwāḥ City four hundred good-complete pieces of coins blṭm.


Translation: He won a certification/ document of a thousand coins blṭm, and the claimed eight pieces of silver.

The adjective RDYM “good-complete coin” replaced the word BLṬM in the following inscriptions:

1. Inscription (Jamme 1962, no. 608): [5-6. šlmnʾ/ ṣrnponsored/ ḍm/ ḏthwʾ/ ʾlfn/ rdym].

Translation: A pure silver statue equal to thousand pieces of good-complete coins rdym.


Translation: A pure silver statue equal to fourteen hundred and one thousand pieces of good-complete coins rdym.

3. Inscription (Stein 2101: 304, no. 24/ 10): ʾshr/ rdym

Translation: Twenty pieces of good-complete coins rdym.

Conclusion
The designation of "BLṬṬ" related to coinage term in Ancient South Arabia has added a new insight to our understanding of South Arabian coinage etymology. This study clearly shows a Mesopotamian influence on Old South Arabian coinage terminology in commercial world.

Based on contextual grounds, some few words in Old South Arabian coinage can be seen to have reference to a monetary system, although they have never appeared on real coins. These words have contributed to our understanding of monetary system there. They can constitute an important part of our understanding of monetary system in Old South Arabia. This study has identified one of these words and which is the core of our study is the "BLṬṬ".

In every context where the word "BLṬṬ" has been used, it was considered to have reference to a monetary system. The word "BLṬṬ" does not only help us to understand the monetary system in Old South Arabia, but also reveals a lot about the influence of Mesopotamian culture on South Arabian coinage institutions and the commercial relations between both civilizations.

Unfortunately, the present study cannot give a precise dating of the coins, but by making comparisons with the styles and standard of other ancient monetary systems, we can say that these were issued over a long period of time 4th century BCE, assuming that the term in target went back to the Mesopotamia origin.

Further study on coinage idiomatic system is needed to give more accurate information including exact dating and usage of word.

**Abbreviations:**

CAD The Assyrian Dictionary. The Oriental Institute, Chicago

CIH Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum, pars quarta, Inscriptions Himyariticas et Sabaees Contines.


**References:**


CIH: *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, pars quarta, Inscriptions Himyariticas et Sabaeeas Contines.


