Kinship terms in the Nabataean inscriptions

This paper examines one of the most important aspects of Nabataean social structure, namely kinship terminology. It examines the linguistic derivations, meanings and social significance of kinship terms, and compares them with those found in other Semitic languages.

Keywords: Nabataeans, epigraphy, inscriptions, kinship, Semitic languages

Introduction

Distributed over a vast area, Nabataean inscriptions provide a good deal of information on the economic, religious, social and daily activities of the Nabataeans. The importance of these inscriptions often goes beyond their main subject. For example, funerary inscriptions, in addition to proclaiming tomb ownership, contain significant religious, historical and social information (Lidzbarski 1898: 130–140). Information on Nabataean kinship may be found in many different types of inscriptions.

Nabataean inscriptions contain many kinship terms. The terms 'b ‘father’, y˚ ‘brother’, ˚jt ‘sister’, br, bn, yld ‘son’, brt, bnt ‘daughter’, bfl ‘husband’, ntt ‘wife’, ytn ‘son-in-law’, ˚lt ‘maternal aunt’, n§yb ‘father-in-law’ and dd ‘paternal uncle’, are all attested in Nabataean inscriptions, especially those of funerary type from Hegra. The context in which such terms were found may help in reconstructing Nabataean social structure, particularly with respect to family structure.

Notes on Nabataean family structure

Our direct knowledge of Nabataean family and social structure comes from the Nabataean texts, especially the funerary ones. In addition, ancient writers such as Diodorus Siculus (80–20 BC), Strabo (64 BC–AD 25) and Josephus (AD 37–97) provide us with a good deal of information, albeit sometimes exaggerated, about Nabataean social structure (Healey 1993: 40).

The family, principally made up of parents and children, was the basic unit of Nabataean society. According to a number of funerary inscriptions, inheritors of a tomb are members of the family (e.g. father, mother, children and their wives, uncle, aunt, son-in-law, father-in-law), reflecting the Nabataean tradition which insists on the transmission of property via the familial lineage. Moreover, the Nabataean contracts of sale of palm-tree farms from Nahal Hever also reflect the importance of familial lineage property, particularly in the approbation clause and the litigation exclusion (Yardeni 2000).

Nabataean inscriptions insist on the concept of the family unit, a concept that may reflect their Bedouin background where the family ties were strong. Hammond hints that sons followed in the vocations of their fathers and took pride in their ancestry. This may be seen in dedicatory inscriptions, and the habit

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1 Abbreviations: abst.: absolute; Ayig: 'The story and wisdom of Ayig' after Cowley 1923: 204–248; CIS: Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum; cstr.: construct; emph.: emphatic; jAr: Jewish Aramaic; Hatr: Hatran; Hebr: Hebrew; m.: masculine; Moab: Moabite; Nab: Nabataean; OldAr: Old Aramaic; OffAr: Official Aramaic; Palm: Palmyrene; Ph: Phoenician; Pun: Punic; RÉS: Répertoire d'Épigraphe sémitique; sing.: singular; suff.: suffix; 1p.s.: first person singular; 2p.s.m.: second person singular masculine; 3p.s.f.: third person singular feminine; 3p.s.m.: third person singular masculine; 3p.pl.m.: third person plural masculine.
of rehearsing lineage relationships as part of naming also reflects this and suggests a patrilineal social structure (Hammond 1973).

The head of the family was the eldest male. This, according to Nabataean inscriptions, could be the father, but in cases where the father was absent, the eldest son, the mother or even the eldest daughter took on the role. A number of Nabataean inscriptions indicate the power of the father in the family. Thus in CIS II 219, Šbytw passed the rights to a tomb to his children and his wife, stating that no stranger had the right to be buried in it, and none of his legal heirs had the right to deliver a deed, a gift or any document in this tomb, or they would risk losing his or her share in it (Healey 1993: 226–228). In CIS II 207, 'ras built a tomb for himself and his father.

Women had clear rights in Nabataean society, including the right to build their own tombs, to inherit property and to dispose of it (Hammond 1973). In CIS II 226 a woman called Hgrw built a tomb for her brother and her maternal aunt (on the other hand, it is not obvious why Hlpw son of Qsntn, in CIS II 209, built a tomb for himself and for his male children only, excluding all females). Women also played an important role in political life, and the portrait of the Nabataean queen is attested on coins along with her title (Meshorer 1975; Hammond 1973).

The Nabataean papyri from the Dead Sea region provide us with more information on inheritance. Thus in one text T` rz asks 'smlk, a creditor, to give back his uncle's two shops since he is now his uncle and his father's legal heir (Starcky 1954: 161–181; Fitzmyer & Harrington 1978; Yardeni 2000: 265–270).

**Kinship terms**

'b: sing. abst. m., common Semitic noun meaning 'father'. The father was the head of the family, and had absolute power over and ownership of family property. Nabataean funerary inscriptions confirm this, since the father, as the owner of the tomb, names those persons who had the right to be buried in it. In many cases he gives this right to some persons and prevents others from having it (e.g. CIS II 219). This term is attested in various forms:

'bd'bd t 'bynt d 'bd'bd t father of this Hynt'.

The noun is frequently attested in this form in Ph, Pun, Palm and Hebr, and it occurs in the sing. emph.'b in Hatr and JAr (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 3).

'by: sing. m. + suff. 1p.s. 'my father'. Two examples of this form occur in Nabataean inscriptions, both of them in Nab papyri from the Dead Sea region (Yardeni 2000: 265–270). This form also occurs in Ph (Donner & Röllig 1969–1973: 26), Moab (1969–1973: 181), OldAr (1969–1973: 214) and OffAr (Ayig 1).

'bk: sing. m. + suff. 2p.s.m. 'your father'. This form occurs once in a Nab papyrus from the Dead Sea region (Starcky 1954: 161–181); (… k`l dy qblt wbdy 'b`k .... 'All that you received and 'bdy your father…'). It appears in OffAr in the form 'bk, and in Hebr as 'byk (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 2).

'byw: sing. m. + suff. 3p.s.f. 'her father'. This form is attested only once at Hegra (CIS II 224: kpr` dnh hwh Fbd`bd t 'br [h] 'This tomb had belonged to 'bd`bd t her father'). It occurs in the same form in OffAr (Cowley 1923: 257, Ayig 55), in Palm (CIS II 40616, 40674), in Hebr (Donner & Röllig 1969–1973: 215) and in Hatr (1969–1973: 107, 416) but it is attributed to a masculine rather than a feminine pronoun and is translated as 'his father' (m. + suff. 3p.s.m).

'bywhy: sing. m. + suff. 3p.s.m. 'his father'. This form is attested frequently in Nab, particularly in funerary inscriptions (e.g. CIS II 207 and 332). The same form is attested in Hatr, Palm and OffAr (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 2–3).

'y: sing. abst. m., common Semitic noun meaning 'brother', frequently attested in Nab (e.g. CIS II 213, 231, NC 37f). It occurs with two meanings; the first is to indicate family kinship, e.g. 'a brother', and the second one is as the Nab title 'Prime Minister' (1995: 31). The eldest brother could exercise the power of pater familias in the absence of his father. We find the same form in Ph (Donner & Röllig 1969–1973: 2411) and in OffAr (Cowley 1923: 2815). The noun appears in various grammatical forms in Nab inscriptions.

'yach: sing. m. + suff. 3p.s.m. 'his brother' (e.g. CIS II 302, 1780, 2654). The same form is attested in OffAr (Cowley 1923: 257), Palm (CIS II 4072), Hatr and JAr (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 29–30), and in OldAr as plur. + suff. 3p.s.m. 'his brothers'. This may be parallel to 'yachy: pl. + suff. 3p.s.m. 'his brothers' in Nab funerary inscriptions (1995: 29).
Another variant (‘jährw) is attested in only one Nab inscription (CIS II 1627: ṣlm ṣlw ‘jährw ‘Peace ṣlw ... his brother). The same form is noted in Palm (1995: 29). The variant ‘jährhy, ‘his brother’, occurs in a few Nab funerary inscriptions (e.g. CIS II 195, 814). Parallels can be found in OffAr (Cowley 1923: 25), Palm (CIS II 4072) and Hatr (34).

‘jähr: sing. m. + suff. 3p.s.f. Nab inscriptions provide us with only one example of this form (CIS II 226: ḏnh ǧw‘y dy bdt hgrw ḫmšlw ‘jähr ‘This is the burial-niche which Hgru made for ḫmšlw, her brother’) (Healey 1993: 13–15). The form also occurs in Palm (CIS II 42846, 4304) and OffAr (CIS I 19) as plur. + suff. 3p.s.f. ‘her brothers’.

‘jährw: dual m. + suff. 3p.m.s. ‘his two brothers’. This is attested once in the Allat temple in Wadi Rum (dkr ‘lt wbr bny’ br ḡdn ṭygpw ṭyd ṣlw ‘jährw h, b [Savignac 1933: 420]) and is unique to Nab.

‘jähr : dual m. + suff. 3 p.s.f. ‘her two brothers’. This is attested once at Hegra (‘l rmx ḵkib ‘jähr ‘made on behalf of ḫm and Kaba, her (two) brothers’). The same form appears in Palm (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 29).

‘yṯ : sing. f. abst., ‘sister’, a common Semitic noun which occurs in various grammatical forms.

‘yṯ : sing. cstr. This occurs twice at Hegra (CIS II 224, 448), and has cognates in Hatr and OffAr (1995: 31).

‘yṯh: sing. f. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘his sister’ (e.g. CIS II 345). This is also attested in OffAr (Cowley 1923: 82) and Palm (CIS II 4535).

‘yṯh: pl. f. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘his sisters’. This occurs several times at Hegra (e.g. CIS II 210). ‘yṯh : dual f. + suff. 3p.m.s. ‘his two sisters’. This occurs once at Hegra (CIS II 201: ḥpsḥ ṣwldḥ ṣwḥw ‘ṃḥ ṣwpw ṣpṯy ṣyṯ ṣwdḥm ‘For himself and his children and ṣbw, his mother, and ṣwpw and ṣpṯy, his [two] sisters’) (Healey 1993: 68–72).

‘yṯhm: pl. f. + suff. 3p.pl.f. ‘their sisters’. This is attested once at Hegra (dhnh ḏpr dy ḏbwd ṣwṣy w ṣgrt ṣwqy w ṣkwṣy ṣnh ṭyrmḥt ‘ḥm ḏḥ ḏḥ ṣymṛt ṣḏḥ ṣṯ ṣṯ ṣṯ ‘This is the tomb which ṣṣy daughter of ṣgrt and ṣqwṣy and ṣkwṣy, her daughters, the Taymanites, made for themselves, each one, and for ṣymṛt and ṣḏḥ, their sisters’ (1993: 137).

‘yṛ: sing. m. cstr. ‘posterity, descendants’. The meaning does not include children or direct descendants (yld). Healey compares it with the Arabic aḥr, yṣḥ, and Heb aḥrwn, but we have no other cognates for this noun in the Semitic inscriptions (1993: 116–117). This form is attested only once at Hegra (CIS II 200).

‘yṛḥ: sing. m. + suff. 3 p.s.m. ‘his posterity’. This is frequently attested in Nab funerary inscriptions (e.g. CIS II 197).

‘yṛhm: sing. m. + suff. 3 p.pl.f. ‘their posterity’. This occurs in many Nab funerary inscriptions at Hegra (e.g. CIS II 200 and 209).

‘yṛhm : sing. m. + suff. 3p.pl.f. ‘their posterity’. This occurs in two Nab inscriptions (CIS II 198 and 203).

‘nṯ: sing. f. abst. ‘wife’ attested in various grammatical forms.

‘nṯ: sing. f. abst. ‘wife’. This is attested twice in the Nab inscriptions. The variant ‘lt occurs in one Palm inscription (CIS II 3969) and in JAr (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 117–118).

‘nṯḥ : sing. f. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘his wife’. This is common in Nab inscriptions (e.g. CIS II 204, 207 and 209). The form also occurs in OffAr (Cowley 1923: 15, 46). The variant ‘ṯḥ is also common in Nab (e.g. CIS II 158) and is attested in JAr and Palm (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 117–118).


‘mḥm: sing. f. + suff. 3p.pl.m. ‘their mother’. This is attested only once in a Nab funerary inscription at Hegra (CIS II 222). It also appears in OffAr (Cowley 1923: 25).


bnṛ: pl. m. abst. ‘sons of’. This form is common in Nab (e.g. CIS 637 and 3219). It is also found in Pun, Hebr, Samal Aramaic, OldAr, Hatr and JAr (1995: 172–178).

bnwḥ: pl. m. + suff. 3 p. s. m. ‘his sons’. This form is common in the Nab inscriptions (e.g. CIS II 202, 354 and 1150) and appears in OffAr, Palm, Hatr (1995: 173). The variant bnwḥ is also common in the Nab funerary inscriptions at Hegra. bnwḥ (cf.
bnwh[yl][CIS], bnwh [Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995] and bnwh [Cantineau 1930–1932]) is another variant attested only once at Petra (CIS 192). bnwh is also attested once (CIS 536) as is bnyw (CIS II 1185).

bnyh : pl. + suff. 3p.s.f. ‘her sons’. Examples are known at Hegra (CIS II 212 and 216) and in OffAr and JAr (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 189, 192).

bnyhm : pl. m. + suff. 3p.pl.m ‘their sons’. This appears in several Nab texts (e.g. CIS II 158 and 209) and in OffAr (1995: 190).


bnth : pl. f. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘his daughters’. This form occurs at Hegra (e.g. CIS II 202 and J5) and in OldAr (Donner & Röllig 1969–1973: 222A) and Palm (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 193).

bntm : pl. m. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘their daughters’. This occurs only once at Hegra (CIS II 207: wlyqynw ‘ntth wlyij, bt wjml bt bntm: for qynw, his wife, and for ybt and ymlt their daughters’) (Healey 1993: 110).

br : sing. m. abst. ‘son of’. This is a common Nab noun (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 191–194). This noun is attested in different form in the Nab inscriptions.

brh : sing. m. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘his son’. This is frequently attested in the Nab inscriptions. Parallels are known in OldAr, OffAr, Palm, Hatr and JAr (1995: 188–191).

brhm : sing. m. + suff. 3p.pl.m. ‘their son’. This is found once in Nab (CIS II 191: d’ npa ‘n’m br ...wry w’zy ‘ntth dy bnh hn’l brhm) and there are no parallels in other Semitic dialects.


bnth : pl. f. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘his daughters’. This form is common in Nab inscriptions (e.g. CIS II 205, 211, and 212) and is attested in Palm as well (1995: 193).

bnthm : pl. m. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘their daughters’. This occurs only once at Hegra (CIS II 207: wlyqynw ‘ntth wlyij, bt wjml bt bntm: and for qynw, his wife, and for ybt and ymlt their daughters’) (Healey 1993: 110).

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bnyh : pl. + suff. 3p.s.f. ‘her sons’. Examples are known at Hegra (CIS II 212 and 216) and in OffAr and JAr (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 189, 192).

bnyhm : pl. m. + suff. 3p.pl.m ‘their sons’. This appears in several Nab texts (e.g. CIS II 158 and 209) and in OffAr (1995: 190).


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brh : sing. m. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘his son’. This is frequently attested in the Nab inscriptions. Parallels are known in OldAr, OffAr, Palm, Hatr and JAr (1995: 188–191).

brhm : sing. m. + suff. 3p.pl.m. ‘their son’. This is found once in Nab (CIS II 191: d’ npa ‘n’m br ...wry w’zy ‘ntth dy bnh hn’l brhm) and there are no parallels in other Semitic dialects.


bnth : pl. f. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘his daughters’. This is common in Nab inscriptions (e.g. CIS II 205, 211, and 212) and is attested in Palm as well (1995: 193).

bnthm : pl. m. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘their daughters’. This occurs only once at Hegra (CIS II 207: wlyqynw ‘ntth wlyij, bt wjml bt bntm: and for qynw, his wife, and for ybt and ymlt their daughters’) (Healey 1993: 110).

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br : sing. m. abst. ‘son of’. This is a common Nab noun (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 191–194). This noun is attested in different form in the Nab inscriptions.

brh : sing. f. + suff. 3. p.s.f. ‘her daughter’. This is found in one Nab funerary text (CIS II 198) and in OffAr (Cowley 1923: 18).

brth : sing. f. + suff. 3. p. s. m. ‘his daughter’. This appears in a number of Nab inscriptions (e.g. CIS II 212, RÉS 2045), and has parallels in OffAr (Cowley 1923: 8, 13), JAr (Fitzmyer & Harrington 1978: 88) and Palm (CIS II 4058).

bl : sing. m. abst. This noun has three meanings in the Semitic languages: ‘lord, owner and husband’ (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 183–183). In Nab it occurs in two forms with the meaning ‘husband’.

bl : sing. m. + suff. 3p.s.f. ‘her husband’. This is found in only one Nab inscription (CIS 162): dy bnh lh ‘dynt b’lh ‘which her husband built for her’. It also occurs in OffAr, Palm and HaTr (1995: 182).

bl : sing. m. + suff. 3p.s.f. ‘my husband or lord’. This occurs in one Nab inscription (CIS 162) and in OffAr (1995: 182).

dd : sing. m. abst., ‘paternal uncle’. This is attested in one Nab text from Nahal Hever in the form dy sing. + suff. 1p.s.m. ‘my uncle’ and in other Semitic inscriptions in various forms (1995: 241).

ylit : sing. f. abst. ‘maternal aunt’. This occurs only once in a Nab funerary inscription from Hegra as ylit (sing. f. + suff. 3p.s.m) ‘his aunt’. (CIS II 226). It also occurs in Palm, and may be borrowed in Arabic Yalat ‘maternal aunt’ (Healey 1993: 145).

ylit : sing. m. abst. ‘son-in-law’. This is attested in one Nab funerary inscription from Hegra (CIS II 209) and in OffAr and JAr in several forms (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 414).

ylit : sing. abst. ‘children’. This is attested in the following forms:


ylit : sing. + suff. 3p.s.m. ‘his children’ (CIS II 197 and 199). The variant wylit is attested in CIS II 223.

ylit : sing. + suff. 3p.s.f. ‘her children’. This form is attested only once in Nab (CIS II 224).

ylit : sing. + suff. 3p.pl.m. ‘their children’ (CIS II 202).


ylit : sing. m. abst. ‘father-in-law’. This is similar to Arabic nasyb and occurs in one Nab inscription from Hegra (CIS II 209).

Conclusion

Nabataean inscriptions are rich in kinship terms. Generally, we note singular and plural forms of the noun attributed to different types of pronouns but there is no distinction between plural and dual forms, which can be understood from the context.
Thus in CIS II 205: *dnh kpr*’ *dy ‘bdw wšwy bṛt bgrt* (2) *wqyw wnsšwyh bntθ*, the term *bntθ* refers to the two daughters *Qaynu* and *Nashkuyah*. The same form indicates the plural form of the noun in CIS II 212: *dnh kpr*’ *dy ‘bd bdšt br ‘rybs lnpsθ* (2) *wlt bṛt wlbny w’lt d’ w bntθ wyldhm*. Grammatically only one example, the inscription from the Allat temple in Wadi Rum, designates a straightforward dual form: *dkrṯ ‘lt wbr bny* br *gdn wtymw wgdn ‘jwyhw b,b* (Savignac 1933: 420). Apart from this example we have no direct grammatical distinction in kinship terms between plural and dual.

The Nabataean family was characterised by its extent. This is well attested in their inscriptions, especially the funerary ones that name the inheritors of the tomb who, following the Nabataean tradition of property inheritance by the familial lineage, are all members of the same family.

References


