Trade Terminology among the Safaitic Arabs before Islam as Reflected in their Inscriptions

Hussein Al-QUDRAH and Sultan Al-MA’ANI
Queen Rania Institute of Tourism and Heritage
The Hashemite University
P.O. Box 150459
13115 Zarqa
JORDAN
E-mail: hqudrah@hu.edu.jo

Abstract

This paper deals with some aspects of commerce (merchandise and trade) activities as attested in the Ancient North Arabian Safaitic inscriptions.

The Safaitic tribes were in close contact with some political entities in the region, Nabataeans and Romans as such. Their inscriptions reflect some aspects of the tribal life of the Safaites and their activities, i.e. the merchandise and trade activities.

The activity of trade is discussed in this paper in the light of some terms that occurred in inscriptions, e.g. the expressions, tgr hkbn “trade in weaving cloth”, and 𐤂𐤋 h𐤂𐤋 t “he bought the booty”, another shows the price w 𐤂𐤋 h fṛs b/reference to mny “he bought the horse in five Minis”, in addition to the verb āry.

Furthermore, we can deduce that they were familiar with manufacturing the salt through the expression of w...š...r 𐤂𐤋 ml... “and prepared a pitfall to extract salt”. The inscriptions, also, gave some clues on the existence of market places, e.g. w q_LINE_1 Phát zm.

The social and daily life, in some cases, motivated the Bedouin to use what is so called "barter", the exchange of animal products by grains and other needed things.

Introduction

As it is known, those who were living in Bādiyat esh-Shām, and those Safaitic communities, among them, emigrated from Arabian Peninsula, they had to adapt with the new agricultural and pastoral environment. It sounded to them that the land of al-āmmād in Bādiyat esh-Shām was to fit their breeding of animals and other activities (1).

1 Dussaud 1959, p. 3
There were principle means of subsistence and economy of Arabian tribes in "aurãb and Bâliyât esh-Shãm. These included sheep and goat pastoralism, trade and cultivating natural areas. However, to keep fit and live in safe, the Arabian tribes defended in favour of their presence; and practiced what is so called guarding “tutelary, guardians” and guiding the caravans trade, they carried goods, in addition they were looking after and breeding the domestic animals (2).

We notify that the scholars are in critical situation to draw a clear picture of commerce; that is due to the rarity and ambiguity of the inscriptions dealing with this activity. In this study, the authors are trying to shed light on the commerce activity through cross examining of Safaitic inscriptions (3).

**The Terms:**

**tgr**

We know little about trading goods and markets, and our knowledge is based on inscriptions. Among the vocabularies in the Safaitic inscriptions is the verb *tgr* “trade” (4). This verb has attested in some inscriptions; it appears to be a rare sign indicating the commerce activity. It would be useful as a major indicator to examine the related vocabularies. A special attention has been paid to the inscription: *lh b n kînh hdr wtgr hkbn* (5), it describes the organization of commerce in terms of artifact-trading process, or the word *kbn* “hemming” (6), which it mentioned in the inscription, it casts a shadow over the activity, which was practicing different forms of weaving as saddlery, plaiting garment or weaving loose outer garment with sleeves (7).

2 Maâeqah 1988, p. 336
3 Villeneuve 1988, p. 102
4 Winnett 1957, p. 133, n° 996
5 Winnett 1957, p. 133, n° 996
6 See Al-Zabûnî 1994., vol. 18, p. 471-72
7 Payne Smith 1981, pp 1671-2
It can be indicated that the Safaities were involved in what is so called (national) economy, there were men employed as workmen, and in return they had wages: *lhmsk bn bh bn ḥs c g̲r h̲g l* (8).

The presence of numerous basalt stone heaps in the desert, known as cairns, led some scholars to suggest that these were used as watching towers or leading signs along trading roads (9). It seems possible that the guides who led the caravans used these cairns to ease their duty in protecting caravans (10).

It is already accepted that the Nabataeans mixed with Safaitic tribes after falling of their state in AD 106, many inscriptions refer to the inhabitants who lived in Harra and Hammad and who had a chance to learn trading methods from the Nabataeans (11). However, the Safaities who lived along the eastern foot mountain accompanied the Nabataeans as their assistance (12). However, it can be said that the Nabataeans played important role in the Safaitc trade.

The term *ḥl* was companied in some inscriptions with *ḥnh m* (13), and in some others it occurred alone (14); it has been interpreted by Grimme as “sell the goods”, it was also mentioned in the Lihyanite inscriptions under the same meaning (15). The inscription CIS 3916 examines a vital trading activity, which is trading in horses: *l (ml bn ṣm bn ṣd ṭ ṣd ṭ lhy hfrs bḥnsh ṣmny* (16) “ml b. ṣm b. ṣd and he bought a horse in five ṣmny (?).

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8 CIS, n° 157
10 Dussaud 1959, p. 56
11 Ali 1976, p. 49
12 Dussaud 1959, p. 7
13 Grimme 1929, p. 40, n° 172
14 Winnett and Harding 1978, p. 168, n° 865, CIS 3916
15 Grimme 1929, p. 40
16 CIS, n° 3916
The inscriptions have also been indicated bartering as one of the commerce activities. It was most likely that sheep, camels, horses and other cattle, in addition to their products were main element in trading activities for bartering with civilized region. There are few inscriptions that reveal this kind of activity. The inscription CIS 3916 has indicated a payment by a dry measure of grain: \( l_{ml} \ bn \ c_{sm} \ bn \ s_{d} \ w_{hfrs} \ b^{y}_{\text{mst}} \ m_{ny} \ h_{frs} \ b^{y}_{\text{mst}} \ m_{ny} \) \(^{(17)}\) "By \( ml \ b. \ c_{sm} \ b. \ s_{d} \), and he took from \( ny \) the horse by five \( m_{ny} \).

**dwg**

It can be expected that peddling was practiced. As we get in inscription which is seemed to be a kind of commerce activity organization which known as peddler, in other way, “market oriented”; that expressed in: \( l_{\text{sym}} \ bn \ c_{m} \ m_{r} {^{18}} b^{c}_{d} \ w_{\text{dwg}} \) \( b_{brqh} \ l \ (r)m \ f_{hlt} \ n_{qmt} \) \(^{(19)}\) "By \( \text{sym} \) son of \( m_{c} \) from the tribe \( b^{c}_{d} \) and he peddled among \( brqh \) of the tribe \( (r)m \), O \( Lt \) (the goddess) take vengeance”. This brings to mind, the locally used word of \( daww_{\text{ag}} \), which means "the man who peddled in between large field-tents selling the goods that would have been carried on donkey back".

**wklt**

In Safaitic, \( wklt \) is attested in Winnett 1957, p. 32, no 152: \( l_{gdn} \ bn \ c_{s} \ bn \ c_{dm} \ bn \ c_{bn} {^{15}} d \ w_{\text{dyb}} \ m_{n} \ h_{wklt} \), this inscription has an economic aspect. The word \( wklt \) is translated by F. Winnett as “store” \(^{(20)}\). His translation plays an important role in understanding the trading activity nature, though the Arabic lexicons have not assured the given meaning. In fact the crucial word has a sense of agent selling.

**wsq**

The term \( wsq \) which is attested in the inscription CIS 2088: \( l^{c}_{d} \ bn \ c_{.k} \ bn \ m_{\text{sr}} \ r \ wk^{p} \ h_{n} \ l^{d} \ l_{\text{ms}} \ wsq \) \(^{(21)}\) “By \( c_{d} \ b. \ Z_{.k} \ b. \ M_{\text{sr}} \ r \), and he guarded the valley for five \( wsq \ (? \)”, ensures the way of payment by measure. The truck system or barter phenomenon was

\(^{17}\) CIS, n° 3916

\(^{18}\) The root \( dwg \) means “carry on commerce”, and ad-daww\(\text{ag} \) “employee, servant, and trader”, see al-%azzr\(\text{n} \) 1979, vol. 2, p. 101; al-R\(\text{az} \) 1986, p. 83.

\(^{19}\) CIS, n° 4447

\(^{20}\) Winnett 1957, p. 32, n° 152

\(^{21}\) CIS, n° 2088
so spread in Bedouin life, as they exchanged fat/ghee or other animal products for commodity the people of city and village (22). This case was the same in the time of Safaitic.

**myr**

It is important to have in mind that the root *myr* is taken as being a key word for Safaitic earnings method. It is attested as the verb *myr* in the term: *lwdm* bn ..*lq* w*y f hlg wmyr (23) “By Wdn b., *lq*, and he grazed in the Lg, and he brought food for sale”. The other attestation case is a noun *mr* in the term: *łmr* bn *‡d* bn [..*r]*dn w‡y* rnts whb hmlk hmr (24) “By *mr* b. †*d* b. [.. *r]*dn, and he turned back in the year that the king offered the supplies or provisions”.

**ml...**

The Safaitic tribesmen in Arabian Desert documented other kinds of commerce on stones, others on rocks showing their interest in salt (*ml...*) trade. They used all possible ways to be commercially active and serve others in surrounding areas. They got advantage of the environment around to help them. The term is presented in one of the inscriptions: *łty* bn *wqs* bn slm wml...fslt slm wônmt wm..lt *ł* y*wr* (25) “By *_ty b. Wqs b. Slm and he trades in salt. And sterility to whom destroys (the inscription). The Arabic lexicon supports the expression: “get trade in salt”, in other cases, “provided by salt” (26). This commerce activity was mentioned in Canaanite texts (27), mainly as *ml...m*. In Hatra, *ml...* denotes to salt-mine, and in Aramaic *ml...* to salt-herb (28).

Other Safaitic inscriptions indicate the presence of “salt-mine”, where the Safaities extracted the salt, this is supported by the text: *lzd* bn n†ft bn *‡ly* bn ‡..y bn ..*wq* bn

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22 Maanathah 1988, pp. 336-338
23 Winnett 1957, p. 71, n° 463
24 CIS, n° 2746
25 Winnett and Harding 1978, p. 39, n° 24
27 Tombach 1978, p. 179
28 Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, p. 632
kwnt bn ȧw f w .ṣr ỳqīt ml ... w² kr wīmt wsl ... ḥbl mdbl wṣr ḥr ... bt fhlt sīm wnqṭ l² yf wṛr

The term w .ṣr ỳqīt ml ... means “prepared a pitfall to extract salt”. The word ỳqīt carries the consequence of the Arabic derivation ỳlīqat “a hollow was excavated just recently.

Our suggestion has not only been based on semantic element, but also on the fact that the area of Jordan’s Harra, mainly al-Azraq district is still used to extract salt in present.

Another opinion suggests a new meaning to (ml ...): wbr yml ... (30) and w ṭry ml ... (31), this make the word ml ... in the two inscriptions in question. Is it a place name where Mil ... ār ṭar ṭar was cited on the eastern south foot of Jabal “aūrān? Or did the two inscriptions indicate salt works? Another example is in question, the inscriptions of WH 37 and 329 make us do not expect that the interpretation of Winnett for wml ... as “travel” (32) is suitable, but we think it reflects the sense “trading in salt”.

V. Clark exposed a family as Gr that was involved in producing and extracting salt, lm... bn ḫd ḥl gr wml ... (33) It’s possible that Gr is one of Safaitic tribes which spread over both Jordan and Syria Harra, mainly, in Jawa, Burqu ḍ, and Zulaf (34). It can be concluded that Gr tribe had a commercial relation with Nabataeans who settled in Bostra and “aūrān in South Syria, or even with the new comers “Romans” who lived in the Decapolis, which is located to the circulation area west of Gr.

It seems that salt was a main and saleable commercial good, and in a pivotal position at the time when the Safaïties existed, it was available in plenty, it was in demand at the Nabataean markets, or perhaps at North-Arab of al-“aūrān markets.

29 CIS, n° 4985
30 CIS, n° 2405
31 Littmann 1943, p. 50, n° 217
32 Winnett 1957, p. 11, n° 37 and p. 54, n° 329
33 Clark 1980, p. 320, n° 637
34 Rousān 1987, p. 286
There is no need to say that salt had a specific functional usage by the Safaitic tribes. It reflected their practice of preserving and conserving meat, after hunting and slaughtering animals, their meat was cut in strips, and then it was spread in the sun. This technique of curing meat is locally known as qadñī.

The inscriptions, also, inform us about necessity for salt to keep the animals in a good health. They used to put a handful of salt in palm hands and feed them to animals, that in time of getting the citrus desert plant rare; as in the following inscriptions: ḥbn bn hwst bn ql wml..t nqth flhrš[y] slm (35) “By Ṯbn b. Ḥwst b. Ql, and he got his she-camel to eat salt. O, Rš[y], give peace. The term ml... has been interpreted by V. Clark as “grew fat. Our view is crossing with his. We interpret it as being linked to Arabic etymology of the term malla..a “put salt” (36).

‘If

In fact the Safaitic inscriptions provided information that is shedding light on trading in ‘If through brief and enigmatic vocabularies. We regard here the term mng’t or mg’t (37), which shows what is to be called manger/trough. They used mangers to put provender for feeding the animals, mainly at the time of scarcity, dry seasons, sterility, and war. The evidence is derived from the verb ‘lf (38) “to feed” in the Safaitic inscriptions: ʾšlh bn ʾš dlh bn gdy wʾlf snṭ ..rb nbf yhd “By ʾšlh b. ʾš dlh b. Gdy. And he fed (animals) in the year of war of nbf and yhd.” (39). S. Abbāzi interprets ‘lf as provender for animals, and in his note ‘lf signifies trade in provender, mainly, at the time of war (40). That indication has shown that another way in commerce and earning was practiced by Safaitic tribes. This type of commerce would have been directed to trade in provender.

A handful indication that the Safaities used provender instead of pasture for animals has been found in this inscription: ʾrṣd bn ḍ bn ..g bn swd wʾlf ḥmˇzy snṭ bʾs

35 Clark 1980, p. 190, n° 82
36 Clark 1980, p. 190, n° 82
37 Grimme 1929, p. 96, n° 213
38 Abbāzi 1996, p. 240
39 Abbāzi 1996, p. 240; see also CIS, n° 2718; 2719; 3933.
40 Abbāzi 1996, p. 241
whgz \( hbl \) smn 'kd \( hdbn \) w\(\overset{\text{n}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) w\(\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}\) ' wr \( h\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}\) (41), “By ‘\( sd \) b. \(\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) b. \(\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) b. \(\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) Wd. And he fed the goats provender in the year of drought and scarcity. O, B’smn give safety and booty who were wandering and errant, and give curse who damaged the inscription”.

\( q\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\)

The term \( q\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) gives an important idea about a market in the Safaitic time. It was a toponym called Zm in Najd of Arabia. It had been said as a safety place for big Arabian tribes, mainly, in winter season. They took it as a starting point to depart toward north in spring season (42), and this is the inscription: \( l\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}mr \) bn \(\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( q\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) bn (43). For \( q\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) the Arabic lexical meaning shows that it stands for a huge market place, where a plenty amount of things are gathered (44). This market was used in the Pre-Islamic periods. We would contend that \( q\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) was used for selling and buying, since the markets can be insured, \(\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}} u\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( u\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \(\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \(\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) and \(\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}} u\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( u\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\), when pilgrimage was held as mentioned by the classical Arabian historians.

\( rhn \)

The statement: \( lbdnn \) bn \( f(l)q \) \( wtw(l \) \( rhn) \) (45) “By Bdn b. \( F(l)q\), and he (put down a pledge)”, might show an evidence for another of commerce activity, known as pledge, which was so spread in the past.

\(\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\)

It could be understood from a Safaitic inscription a further dimension in regard to the Safaitic commerce; including sheep and camels. Buying and selling activities were frequently mentioned in the Safaitic inscriptions. Some examples may help to illustrate this point. A tribesman called \( \overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( bnn\) had bought a she-camel from his brother for a hundred: \( l\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( bnn \) (w)dn \( c2\) \( bnn\) \( \overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( d\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( w\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( m\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( c2\) \( hbkrt \) \( bm\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( w\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\overset{\text{\textdagger}}{\text{\textdagger}}}}\) \( bhh\)

41 Littmann 1943, p. 185, n° 722

42 Dussaud 1959, p. 3

43 CIS, n° 1536


45 Oxtoby 1968, p. 57, n° 102
w$3wh \(^{46}\), with the same price another bought a camel: \(\ldots \, \text{wāry m}^2 n \, \text{hgml bm i whlt m..lt} \, \ldots \)^{47}. The price here is in question, was it a measure unit? Or was it a coin denomination? If so, it would be in Nabataean or Romans coins; though no currency evidence was found, even the inscriptions did not give us a clear idea about this aspect.

**Conclusion**

This study discussed the trade activity that was practiced by Safaitic tribes which formed a vital part in their daily life, and played an important role between them and the tribes and societies who lived around. Safaitic tribes had strong commerce relations with their neighbors; the Nabataeans in Bostra. Moreover, it was important for the Safaitic tribes to become an ally to the Romans; they needed to easily pass the routes guarded by Roman legions and fortifications, which were distributed along trade routes, as well as around cities.

Inscriptions were the main source of information to explore this cultural aspect. The study came out with some significant results; one of them is the fact that a special terminology was used to indicate economic and commercial activities, moreover, some particular goods were mentioned as well as their price, currency/measure was used, and the name of the market.

The Safaitic words in the inscriptions were compared with their parallels in other North Arabic inscriptions as Thamudic and Libyanite.

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\(^{46}\) CIS, n\f o 2832

\(^{47}\) Rous\f 2005, p. 237, n\f o 321


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