

Minaeans in the Mediterranean. Reevaluating two Old South Arabian inscriptions from Delos

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Abstract

Two well-known texts on altars from Delos (*RES* 3952; *M* 349) dating to the period after 167 BC attest to contacts between the Aegean and Ancient Yemen. Reexamining these two important inscriptions, this article argues that both were set up by Minaeans. As for the altar bearing inscription *M* 349, we interpret the Greek inscriptions as later additions, the purpose of which was to inform readers who were unfamiliar with the Old South Arabian script of the deity venerated.

KEYWORDS

Delos, epigraphy, Minaeans, Old South Arabian studies

1 | INTRODUCTION

In a number of recent articles, we have proposed new dates for four inscriptions in the Old South Arabian languages that allow for synchronisms with events and rulers from the Hellenistic period (Sørensen & Geus, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022).

Nowhere, however, is the proximity between Ancient Greece and Yemen as closely felt as in Delos, that meeting place of different peoples and gods, where two altars (*RES* 3952 = *ID* 2319; *M* 349 = *RES* 3570 = *ID* 2320) carrying inscriptions in the Old South Arabian languages were erected.

Although enjoying almost 150 years of nominal independence after its liberation from Athens in 314 BC, Delos and the Cyclades were in fact a pawn in the changing games of the Hellenistic states, from Antigonos Monophthalmos at the end of the 4th century to the considerable naval empire of Rhodes around the turn of the 3rd/2nd century BC (Reger, 1994, pp. 15–26). When Rome became the dominant factor in the Mediterranean, Delos was once again handed over to Athens and declared a free port in 167 BC. Taking over the island, Athens expelled the Delians and settled it with Athenians (Roussel, 1987, pp. 7–20). For the next

century, and in particular, after Rome's destruction of Corinth in 146 BC, Delos developed into a flourishing commercial centre (and slave market), displaying considerable urban development (Bruneau & Ducat, 2005, pp. 41–44; Zarmakoupi, 2018).

2 | *RES* 3952 (FIGURE 1)

This text provides the best starting point, as this inscribed altar was found in situ in the ruins of an anonymous sanctuary on the north side of Mount Kynthos. Designated C by the excavators, it is but one among 13 adjacent buildings (B–N), all of which are non-Greek-style, open-air sanctuaries (Bruneau & Ducat, 2005, pp. 288–290). Several Greek inscriptions were found inside these sacred buildings (see the list in Bruneau, 1970, p. 476). If not from C, then the next-door temple B, a fragmentary inscription (*ID* 2310) mentioning refurbishments dated to 96/95 BC attributes the building to the so-called *First gods* (Πρῶτοι θεοῖ). This rare appellation may refer to Semitic gods (cf. Baslez, 1977, pp. 100–101), and among the other texts found in the sanctuaries are votives to Zeus Megistos (*ID* 2307; 2312?), possibly rendering Baal; to the gods of

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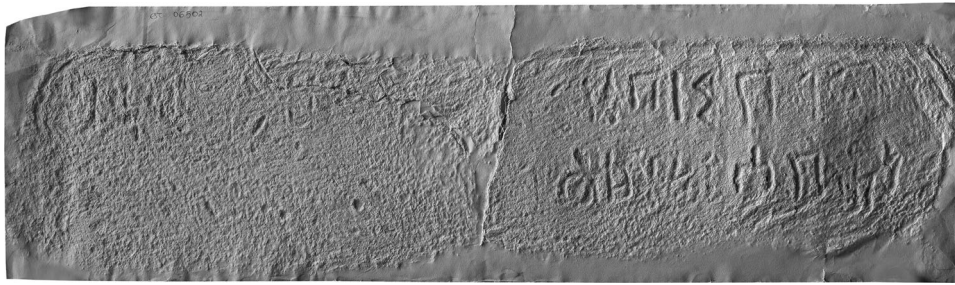


FIGURE 1 RES 3952 = ID 2319 (École française d'Athènes).

Jamnia (2308–2309); to a Sidonian divinity (2314); to Herakles Kallinikos (2433); to Dusares (2315) as well as indications of a cult for Phrygian Kybele (2578). Thus, B and C may have been divided between Phrygian and Semitic divinities (Baslez, 1977, pp. 105–109; Bruneau, 1970, pp. 475–478; Bruneau & Ducat, 2005, p. 289; Plassart, 1928, pp. 269–270).

The altar, the dimensions of which are $162 \times 69 \times 59$ cm, carries two lines in the Old South Arabian script¹:

ĠLBM | b(n) | [---] (d)-R(M) [..]N |

nšb SYN | d-(')L[M]

Translation:

Ġalibum, son of ..., d-RM.N

set up for Siyān of 'Alīm.

Siyān is the name of a lunar deity worshipped most prominently in the temple 'Alīm in Šabwa, the capital of the Old South Arabian kingdom of Hadramaut. The reference to Siyān at first glance appears to attest to a Hadramitic presence in Delos, most certainly connected to commerce. Siyān is, however, not at all exclusive to the Hadramitic kingdom, and this divinity is attested, for example, in a Minaean inscription in Qarnāwu, the capital of Ma'in (Ma'in 8 = M 30 = RES 2775) set up by a Hadramitic ruler, in several Sabaic inscriptions (RES 3945; Ir 37/12)² but also in Qaryat al-Faw, outside the great states of Ancient Yemen (cf. Robin, 2019, p. 243). Siyān appears not merely to have been a tribal but rather an “international” deity venerated especially by traders. Furthermore, there is nothing clearly identifiable as Hadramitic in these two short lines.³

Delos suffered a major blow under the attack of Mithradates VI Eupator, in 88 BC, from which it never recovered. Although sanctuaries B and C remained in use until the imperial period, as evinced by a dedication to Dusares set up in 9 BC by the Nabatean Syllaios, whom Strabon famously made responsible for the setbacks during Aelius Gallus' invasion of Arabia Felix (ID 2315 = Hackl, 2003, pp. 124–126, no. A.004.01; Bruneau, 1970, p. 244; cf. Milik, 1976, p. 146, n. 11; Petrantoni, 2021, pp. 135–136, no. 50), most economic activity (including that of the merchants from Ancient Yemen) will have taken place between 167 and the early 1st century BC. For centuries Hadramaut played a role among the states of Ancient Yemen, but its period of international influence does not commence until the 2nd century AD (cf. Avanzini, 2016, pp. 235–242)⁴. Thus, it would be very surprising to encounter Hadramitic merchants in the Mediterranean in the 2nd century BC. Rather, it is to the Minaeans, the northernmost of the Old South Arabian kingdoms, that we must look for commercial activity in the 2nd century BC. Indeed, Minaean traders make themselves noteworthy throughout the Arabian Peninsula, among others with a trading station in Qaryat al-Faw, at Dedan (al-'Ulā), 150 km west of Tayma, but also in Egypt (e.g., M 27; 247; 338. Avanzini, 2016, pp. 166–167; cf. Pirenne, 1960, pp. 188–189; Robin, 2019, p. 243; Rossi, 2014).

3 | M 349 (FIGURES 2 AND 3)

Furthermore, Minaean presence in Delos is confirmed by the other inscription M 349 (=ID 2320). This round marble altar was found in the so-called Agora of Theophrastos on the southwestern side of the small island in a secondary context (Clermont-Ganneau, 1908, p. 548). In general, this area has turned up several inscriptions, which have been removed from their initial setting, a fate clearly shared by M 349 (Bruneau, 1970, p. 478).

¹ Apart from Figure 1 we refer to the photos in Plassart (1928, p. 264, fig. 211) and Robin (1991, p. 61, fig. 18).

² Additional attestations may be consulted at: <http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/SabaWeb/Suche/Suche/SearchResultDetail?idxLemma=5816&showAll=0>

³ In addition, the present inscription is the earliest attestation of the name Ġalibum, which is extremely rare, cf. *Iryāb* 1; RES 3856.

⁴ See, however, Plin. *Nat.* 12, 63.



FIGURE 2 *M* 349 = *RES* 3570 = *ID* 2320 (École française d'Athènes).

The altar, the dimensions of which are 59 × 33 cm, carries three lines in the Old South Arabian script (3 cm in height) and two lines in Greek (1.5 cm). In front of line 1 are carved monograms signifying three Minaean gods: 'Aṭṭar dū-Qabḏ, Waddum and Nakraḥ (cf. Robin, 2015, p. 118).

ḤN' / w-ZYD' L / d_y / ḤDB

nšb / mḏbh / WDM / w-'lt

M'N / b-DLṬ

Ὀδδου

θεοῦ

Μινναίων

Ὀάδδω

Translation:

Ḥāni' and Zayd'īl of (the clan of) Ḥaḏab set up the altar of Waddum and the gods of Ma'īn in Delos.

(Greek) (Belonging to) Oddos, the god of the Minaeans.

For Oaddos.

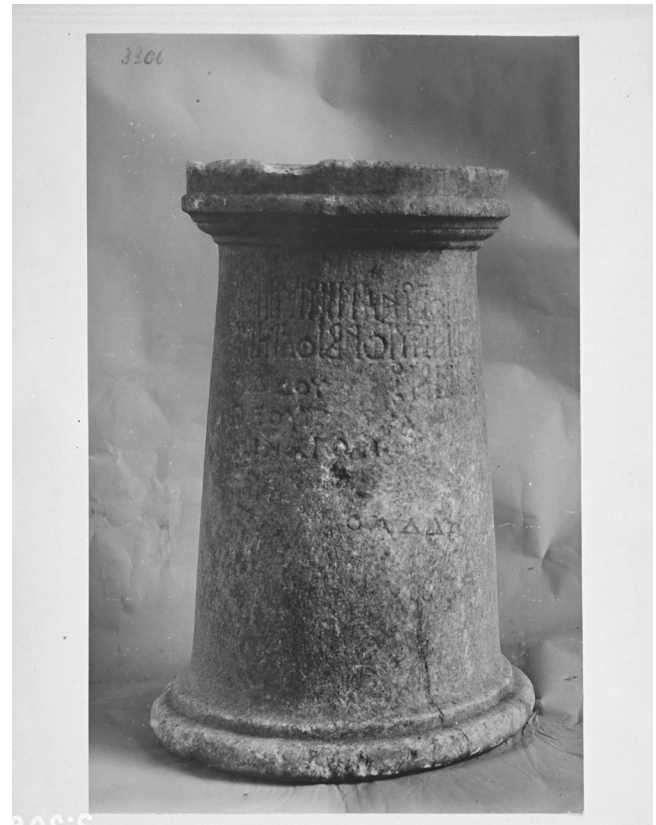


FIGURE 3 *M* 349 = *RES* 3570 = *ID* 2320 (École française d'Athènes).

The text identifies itself as Minaean by referring to Wadd(um), the most prominent god among the Minaeans, the other national gods of Ma'īn as well as a clan name (ḤDB) attested only in Minaean inscriptions (*GOAM* 314). Interestingly, two distinct Greek inscriptions appear to inform the Greek reader, to which god the altar was set up, one in the genitive possessive and the other in the dative. That different hands carved the two Greek inscriptions is obvious from the execution of the letters: the so-called broken-bar alpha in the second Greek inscription does not find a parallel in the first. Furthermore, the final line slopes towards the lower right-hand side whereas the first inscription is carefully aligned. In addition, the rendering of the chief Minaean deity results in two different forms: Oddos and Oaddos. Thus, the second Greek inscription appears to correct not only the vocalisation of the theonym but also to indicate the votive context of the altar by resorting to the dative (cf. Clermont-Ganneau, 1908, pp. 550–552; Weber, 1909, p. 61–62). As such the Greek inscriptions do not amount to translations of the Minaean text. In fact, “true” bilingual inscriptions in Delos are not particularly prominent among inscriptions set up by Semitic peoples (cf. Adams, 2003, pp. 642–686; Parker, 2017, p. 116; Rovai, 2020).

If a palaeographical comparison with at least relatively dated inscriptions from Delos is allowed, the first Greek text

may tentatively be dated towards the end of the 2nd century BC (cf. *ID* 1732; 1754).⁵ The second Greek inscription varies only slightly in execution (notably the broken-bar alpha) and need not be much younger than the former.

Compared to the pitfalls associated with palaeographical dating of Greek and Latin inscriptions, the Old South Arabian script is far more easily divided into distinct palaeographical steps, and a number of anchor points based on synchronisms have in recent years led to the emergence of a fixed chronology (cf. Arbach, 2017; Stein, 2013). Thus, *M* 349 belongs to Stein's palaeographical step C1 evincing broken cross bars (*'*, *h* and *n*), tall, slender vertical bars, unfolding *m*, wide *t*, and elementary serifs. Based on synchronisms we date Stein's C1 to the first half of 2nd-century BC (cf. also Pirenne, 1956, p. 36, 168, 1960, p. 171; cf. Sørensen & Geus, 2020, 2021, 2022).⁶

At first glance, it may seem troubling that the Greek inscriptions are notably younger. It should, however, not surprise us if these two texts were only added later. As already mentioned, neither Greek inscription translates the Minaean text. Rather, they inform the reader unfamiliar with the Old South Arabian script of the context of the inscription. In sum, this marble altar for Wadd(um) was inscribed no less than three times. The purpose of adding Greek inscriptions to an altar that seems to belong to the private sphere is, however, not obvious.

If we compare this Minaean inscription to the inscribed altar from the sanctuary on Mount Kynthos (*RES* 3952), we note that although less elaborately executed the script of this text belongs to the same palaeographical step (C1 Stein) as the former. In addition, the same verb *nšb* ('set up') is used, where other idioms could equally have been resorted to.

Apparently, both altars were set up in the same period and, as argued above, belong to a Minaean context. The bilingual altar has been moved from its original context, and already Bruneau proposed assigning it to the same sanctuary (B or C) as *RES* 3952. In addition, Bruneau also suggested that the Greek inscription set up to Helios by an Arab (Ἁραῦ) (*ID* 2321), found near the Agora of the Athenians and the Basilica of St. Cyriac, will have belonged to one of the adjacent buildings on Mount Kynthos (Bruneau, 1970, p. 478). Seen in this light, these open-air sanctuaries catered to several Semitic worshippers (Roussel, 1987, pp. 275–276).

4 | CONCLUSION

We have argued that *RES* 3952, an altar to Siyān of 'Alīm, is to be identified as Minaean and not Hadramitic. Furthermore, the inscribed Minaean altar (*M* 349) found

in the Agora of Theophrastos will originally have been set up in the same open-air sanctuary as *RES* 3952, on Mount Kynthos. Palaeographically, the two inscriptions in the Old South Arabian script belong to the first half of the 2nd century. The Greek inscriptions on *M* 349 were added only later, most likely towards the end of the 2nd century BC.

Whereas Egyptians and Phoenicians were present in Delos already during the period of independence, other Semitic peoples appear only to have settled on the small island after 167 BC when a number of them set up sanctuaries on Mount Kynthos (cf. Plassart, 1928, pp. 257–289; Rauh, 1993, p. 53; Scott, 2012, pp. 70–71). This fits a period in which Minaean traders were active in the Red Sea Basin as well as the Mediterranean (Graf, 2014, pp. 199–203; cf. Robin, 1991–1993, p. 62).⁷

5 | SIGLA

ID = Roussel, P. & Launey, M. (1926–1972). *Inscriptions de Délos, 1–7*. Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres.

M = Garbini, G. (1974). *Iscrizioni sudarabiche, 1. Iscrizioni minee*. Istituto orientale di Napoli.

Ma'in = Bron, F. (1998). *Inventaire des inscriptions sudarabiques, 3a–b. Ma'in*. De Boccard.

RES = Clermont-Ganneau, C., & Chabot, J.-B., & Ryckmanns, J. (1900). *Répertoire d'Épigraphie Sémitique, 1–8*. Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the editors of *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* for accepting this article. In addition, we thank the members of our reading group “Old South Arabian inscriptions” at the Department for “Historical geography of the ancient Mediterranean world” at Freie Universität Berlin for comments on this paper. Finally, we have benefitted from Anca Dan, Daniella Summa, and Mounir Arbach and the comments of the anonymous reviewers. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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⁵These two public bilingual documents (Latin and Greek) evince similar size and execution of letters with marked serifs. In addition, *ID* 1754 was also found in the Agora of Theophrastos.

⁶It should be mentioned that we do not adhere to the so-called short chronology of Pirenne.

⁷Similarly from the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, albeit from Gerrha and not Ma'in, is Temellatos, who recurs in a number of inscriptions from the Asklepion in Delphi, mainly in the 140s BC, cf. *ID* 1442; 1444–1445; 1449–1450; 1452.

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How to cite this article: Sørensen, S. L. & Geus, K. (2023). Minaeans in the Mediterranean. Reevaluating two Old South Arabian inscriptions from Delos. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 34, 128–132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aae.12229>