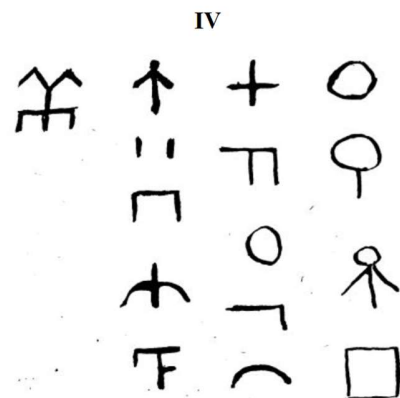


Theodore Bent's Dhofari 1 inscriptions, Qalansiyah, Soqatra¹

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Introduction

Mabel and Theodore Bent documented a panel of Dhofari 1 inscriptions carved on a large upright rock near the town of Qalansiyah (Qulansiya), near a hamlet called 'Haida'. The site has not been relocated and there appears to be no trace of a settlement by this name.³ The inscriptions were first published in the Bents' *Southern Arabia* in 1900, based on the original copy Theodore Bent produced in his notebook on site. The Bents' notebooks from their travels, held in the archive of the Hellenic Society, have been recently scanned and are available online from the School of Advanced Study, University of London. This permits us to compare both copies and to try to arrive at an interpretation of the inscriptions in light of the recent decipherment of the Dhofari script and the related Dhofari 1a inscription published by Jansen van Rensburg.⁴



LETTERS DISTINGUISHABLE OF AN ALMOST OBLITERATED INSCRIPTION NEAR HAIDI VILLAGE, NEAR KALENZIA, SOKOTRA, COPIED BY THEODORE BENT

Image 1: Copy of the Dhofari 1 inscriptions from the Bents' *Southern Arabia* (1900, Appendix IV, public domain).

The copy found in *Southern Arabia*, Appendix IV, presents us with a number of familiar glyphs. The = sign is the first clue as to the identification of this script as Script 1. Glyph 3 in column 1 from the right, however, attests a form that is not known from the three abecedaries of the mainland

¹ The idea for this small note comes from Gerald Brisch's encouragement. I thank him for providing the references to Th. Bent's original notebook.

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³ Jansen van Rensburg 2018: 3.2.5.

⁴ Al-Jallad 2025a; Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* 2018.

and may suggest a local variant of Script 1 in use on the island. The final glyph of column 1 is a well-shaped square, which also does not correspond to a specific glyph on the mainland. The remaining glyphs do not present any challenges to the reading. We may note that the final glyph of column 3 looks irregular, but if we restore the strokes of both legs to the same length, we produce a well-formed *alif*, '.

The original copy by Bent provides us with a few important differences that aid in the identification of the glyphs.

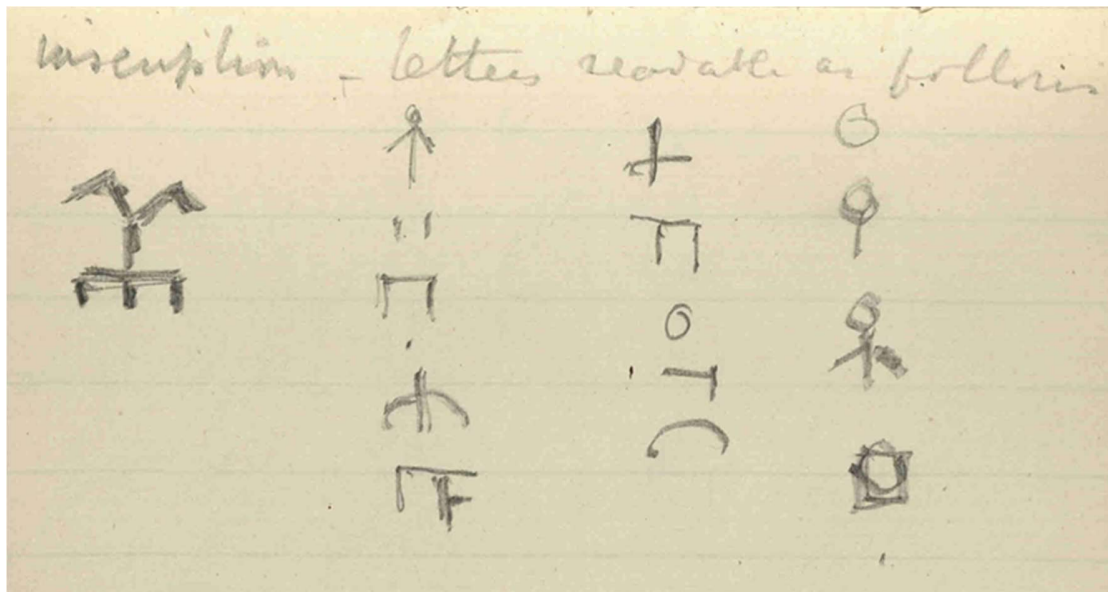


Image 2: Copy of the Dhofari 1 inscriptions from Theodore Bent's 1896/7 travel notebook, pp. 9-10 (Hellenic Society Archive/School of Advanced Study, University of London; CC).

Here, we see that our intuitions were correct. The final glyph of column 3 did possess two legs of the same stroke length. The *alif* is similar in form to the glyph attested in SDh 1. The final glyph of column 1 reflects some hesitation on the part of Bent. He seems to have originally seen an oval, larger than the circle which begins this column, but then normalized it to a square. I would suggest reading this glyph as a large oval, following Bent's original estimation, and interpreting it as a *d*.

Possible Interpretation

Dhofari 1 inscriptions are usually painted or carved in vertical columns right to left.

Column 1: The preliminary reading of this column is 'y s' d. The phonemic value of the third glyph is unclear as it is not commonly attested in the mainland. It can be compared to the South

Arabian ς and indeed one attestation of this letter in Dhofari script 2, 𐩦 .⁵ Thus, a preliminary interpretation of the glyph as a ς is a reasonable hypothesis. This produces a *fay'al* nominal pattern, which is rather common in Dhofari. Without further context, it is best to provisionally interpret it as an anthroponym from the root ' ςd '. This root is relatively productive in the Ancient North Arabian onomasticon, with over 60 attestations in OCIANA.

The reading of the second column appears to be rather straightforward as well, giving us $t k' l b$. Unlike column 1, however, this must be understood as a phrase rather than a personal name. Without word dividers, we have only formulaic parallels to help divine its meaning. I would suggest parsing it into two words, tk' and lb . The first should be understood as a t -stem verb, a medio-passive, from the root k' , meaning 'to be faint-hearted', 'feeble' in Arabic.⁶ The following word lb is the common Semitic word for 'heart', **lubb*, which complements in the interpretation of the first element. The noun *lbb* 'beloved' has been previously attested in KMG 149-151, and *lbb* is common in the Himaitic inscriptions as a verb meaning 'to love'. The two together then could produce a phrase 'was faint of heart'.

The third column appears to read $hgb h'$. We may note that the first glyph which we read as h is much more angular than the penultimate glyph. Moreover, Bent's original copy gives the impression that the three legs branch out from a circle. This glyph, however, would be distinct from the putative ς of column 1. Instead of introducing a new letter shape based on this admittedly unsure copy, I would rely on a formulaic parallel in SDh 1. This text begins clearly with the sequence $h g b$. That appears to be repeated here.



Image 3: SDh 1 (© Jansen van Rensburg; CC BY).

We have originally interpreted hgb as an anthroponym in SDh 1 but its occurrence here in a different context may suggest that it is a substantive or verb. It is followed by h' , which is uninterpretable at the present moment. It could be related to 'life', hyw , attested in many of the

⁵ Al-Jallad 2025b.

⁶ WKAS I: 227b.

mainland inscriptions.⁷ Our current state of knowledge does not permit any further interpretation of this column.

The final column likely contains a monogram or wasm (tribal symbol). Whatever it is, it is not a known glyph, and a single-character inscription is improbable.

Conclusions

The tracing of weathered inscriptions in an unknown script is an extremely difficult task and so it is remarkable that Theodore Bent's drawing lends itself even to the rudimentary reading provided above. However, the corpus of Socotran inscriptions is far too small to provide a reliable and falsifiable interpretation. The hypotheses offered here are groundwork, testing various interpretations until enough inscriptions are discovered to rule out certain hermeneutical paths.

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⁷ KMI 6-7.