



Aethiopica 21 (2018)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

ALESSANDRO BAUSI, Universität Hamburg

Review

ABRAHAM J. DREWES and JACQUES RYCKMANS, *Les inscriptions sudarabes sur bois dans la collection de l'Oosters Instituut conservée dans la bibliothèque universitaire de Leiden*

Aethiopica 21 (2018), 243–246

ISSN: 1430-1938

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob-Ludolf-Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper †, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg, and Siegbert Uhlig

REVIEWS

ABRAHAM J. DREWES and JACQUES RYCKMANS, *Les inscriptions sud-arabes sur bois dans la collection de l'Oosters Instituut conservée dans la bibliothèque universitaire de Leiden*, Texte révisé et adapté par Peter Stein, édité par Peter Stein et Harry Stroomer (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016). xxxii, 300 pp., 125 pl. Price: €100.80. ISBN: 978-3-447-10589-7.

This large volume catalogues and edits the collection of wooden sticks inscribed with minuscule South Arabian script and in South Arabian languages from the Universiteitsbibliotheek of Leiden. This library holds one of the three largest collections in the world of such objects found in pre-Islamic Yemen; the other two collections being in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, and in two museums in Ṣanʿāʾ, Yemen: both have recently been published by Peter Stein (half of the Munich collection) and Mohammed Maraqtan respectively.¹ These objects all originate from the city of Naššān, in the Wādī al-Jawf in the north of Yemen, and document an exceptional city archive of Ancient South Arabia from the very beginning of the first millennium BCE until the sixth century CE.

The study of the Leiden collection—acquired in 1993 by the Leiden foundation Het Oosters Instituut and eventually given on loan to the University Library by the board of the foundation—was entrusted to the renowned scholars, Abraham Johannes Drewes (1927–2007), from Universiteit Leiden, and Jacques Ryckmans (1924–2005), from Université catholique de Louvain. They worked jointly on the collection from 1994 to 1999, when, for health reasons, Ryckmans could no longer continue; Drewes kept on working, but was unable to complete the task before his death. In accordance with Drewes's will, Harry Stroomer took care of the electronic manuscript and had it published. In order to accomplish the work, he sought the collaboration of one of the best specialists in South-Arabian

¹ See P. Stein, *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelinschriften auf Holzstäbchen aus der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in München*, I: *Die Inschriften der mittel- und spätsabäischen Periode*, 1: *Text*, 2: *Verzeichnisse und Tafeln*, Epigraphische Forschungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel, 5 (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 2010); Mohammed Maraqtan, *Altsüdarabische Texte auf Holzstäbchen: Epigraphische und kulturhistorische Untersuchungen*, Beirut Texts and Studies, 103 (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2014).

studies and particularly in the analysis of inscribed wooden sticks: Peter Stein, who, meanwhile, had begun working on the Munich collection. Stein carried out the work in 2009–2011, and the present volume is the result of his careful revision and corrections: his notes are marked with ‘PS’, while the contribution of Drewes and Ryckmans is kept intact wherever possible and, where necessary, is marked with ‘DR’.

The catalogued collection consists of 340 items from the Het Oosters Instituut collection (marked with the siglum ‘L’), plus three inscriptions belonging to the Leiden University Library (marked with the siglum ‘UB’), forty-three modern fakes, and one anepigraph artefact. After the Preface by Harry Stroomer (pp. vii–x), Peter Stein provides the ‘Remarques préliminaires du reviseur’ (pp. xi–xxii) explaining his revision and the differences between his own contribution and the work carried out by Drewes and Ryckmans, as well as how the respective contributions are indicated in the catalogue. Stein’s clear ‘Index des inscriptions’ (pp. xxiii–xxxii) categorizes the inscriptions according to their genre as letters (74), juridical documents (117), religious texts (12), lists of personal names (9), exercises (31), undetermined (100), and fakes (43), plus the anepigraph artefact. For each of them, the Index provides concise information in table form on the number of lines preserved (texts normally consist of very few lines, with, for instance, the letter L 303 having the exceptional number of $13 + 16 = 29$ lines), on the language (Sabaean or Minaean), on the palaeographic period (from I to IVb), on the material, and, where available, on the corresponding plate(s) in the volume. In the absence of any comprehensive index of words, names, or terms, this Index is an essential tool for the user of the catalogue. The content of the inscriptions varies widely, although it remains within the range of what is usually contained in other ‘ancient archives’ of the Ancient Near East and Graeco-Roman world: private correspondence of Sabaeans and Minaeans, legal and business documents, records of religious practices, and exercises in scribal education (e.g. alphabets). Its enormous importance lies in the obvious fact that this is one of the very few known archives from Ancient South Arabia, and that the inscriptions are written in a minuscule script, at variance with the well-known monumental script of the inscriptions on stone, rock, or metal.

Each item is described with a siglum, a short description of the material artefact, a transliteration of the texts, and a few accompanying notes mainly concerning the different readings; however, there are no translations or detailed linguistic and philological commentaries. The artefacts consist of petioles, namely the stalks that attach the leaf blade to the stem, or of wooden sticks. All petioles are from the *phoenix dactylifera*, or date palm, whereas the sticks are from a different kind of wood that Stein could sometimes

identify by comparison with the items in the Munich collection: the kind of wood shows that some of the artefacts were not produced in Wādī al-Jawf, where they were actually preserved, and is therefore of considerable importance for historical reconstruction.

The palaeographic periodization follows the system established by Ryckmans in 2001 (I, IIa–d, IIIa–b, IVa–b, with IVb yielding inscriptions in Sabaean only),² yet with some uncertainty as to the absolute dates. If the oldest carbon-14 dated inscription goes back to the eleventh/tenth century BCE (L 024, 1073–902 BCE, attributed to phase II by ‘DR’, but to phase I by ‘PS’), the Munich collection has one item (X.BSB 74) dating back to 522 CE; yet, the date of transition from one period to the next can only be guessed (II d to III a around the fifth century BCE, III a to IV a around the third century BCE).

A small paragraph of the ‘Remarques préliminaires’ (p. xvii) is dedicated to the carbon-14 analysis of some items from the collection, carried out on the initiative of Michael C. A. Macdonald: thirty-six sticks were examined in the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit of the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art at the University of Oxford, between 2003 (six sticks) and 2006 (thirty-five sticks), and the results were published in 2013 in an article of which Drewes is one of the authors.³ All calibrated dates of the carbon-14 analysis are now included in the catalogue descriptions. The rich ‘Références’ include a special section (p. xxii) on Drewes’s and Ryckmans’s publications on the wooden stick inscriptions since 1984: this is a useful reminder of the importance of both scholars’ contributions to the new domain of South Arabian minuscule inscriptions based on the Leiden collection.

The core of the volume is occupied by the inventory of the wooden sticks according to the shelf mark order. The description includes a section with the transliteration of each single text, but, as already mentioned, without a translation (pp. 1–175). The volume is completed by 125 full-page plates with black and white pictures of quite a large number of inscriptions (174, including a few samples of fakes as well as the anepigraph artefact, i.e. L 273), selected in consideration of the degree of uncertainty of the readings.

² J. Ryckmans, ‘Origin and evolution of South Arabian minuscule writing on wood (1)’, *Arabian archaeology and epigraphy*, 12/2 (2001), 223–235.

³ A. J. Drewes, T. F. G. Higham, M. C. A. Macdonald, and C. Bronk Ramsey, ‘Some absolute dates for the development of the Ancient South Arabian minuscule script’, *Arabian archaeology and epigraphy*, 24/2 (2013), 196–207.

It is always difficult to edit and bring to completion unfinished works. In this case one can sincerely congratulate the editors, Peter Stein (who also acted as a *de facto* co-author carefully updating the catalogue to the current state of the art) and Harry Stroomer (on behalf of Leiden University and the Het Oosters Instituut as main promoter of the initiative). Firstly, they have made available a collection that is essential in any research on Ancient South Arabia; secondly, they have tacitly acclaimed the two great scholars who started the enterprise of cataloguing the collection without being able to bring it to publication. And, although the crucial tasks of understanding, translating and commenting the texts in detail, as well as that of providing a study of the language and lexicon are yet to be undertaken, nevertheless, this publication, along with the comparable ones on the collections of Munich and Şan^{ca}, is already a remarkable step towards a completely new perception of the culture and society of Ancient South Arabia and of the role that written culture and archival practices played in it, starting from the early first millennium CE.⁴ Nothing comparable has yet been discovered for Ethiopia, but such discoveries might encourage further research and already have some bearing on the question of the origins of the Ethiopic script.

Alessandro Bausi, Universität Hamburg

⁴ It is worthwhile to quote what once wrote Christian Julien Robin, almost thirty-five years ago, at the dawn of the work on Ancient South Arabian wooden inscriptions: ‘Les études sudarabiques sont donc en pleine expansion comme le montre la bibliographie annuelle qui approche désormais la centaine de titres. Des résultats majeurs peuvent être attendus des recherches en cours, mais il ne faut pas perdre de vue que nous ne connaissons jamais qu’une infime partie de la réalité antique, d’autant plus réduite que nous ne possédons que des textes solennels et stéréotypés. L’espoir de découvrir des textes plus spontanés (correspondances, comptes, archives) ou des compositions littéraires, qui nous éclaireraient sur l’économie, la vie sociale ou les conceptions religieuses, est bien mince: malgré les fouilles clandestines, on n’a encore découvert que deux missives tracées à l’encre sur des bâtonnets de bois en forme de cigare. Les textes de cette sorte étaient sans doute notés sur des matières périssables (papyrus, parchemin ou bois) qui, sauf exception, ont disparu. Une découverte contredisant cet avis pessimiste aurait évidemment une portée considérable et renouvelerait entièrement notre savoir’, see C. J. Robin, ‘La civilisation de l’Arabie méridionale avant l’Islam’, in J. Chelhod, ed., *L’Arabie du Sud: Histoire et civilisation*, I: *Le peuple yéménite et ses racines*, Islam d’Hier et d’Aujourd’hui, 21 (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984), 195–223, p. 222.