

Two Rock-Inscriptions Relating to the Yu‘firid Dynasty of the Yemen

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Two undated Arabic rock-inscriptions were discovered by the present writer on the Saudi section of the Yemeni highland pilgrim route connecting Ṣan‘ā’ with Mecca.¹

Historically, these two inscriptions are significant, since they both bear the names of two rulers of the Yu‘firid dynasty of the Yemen. They were discovered at the pass of al-Maḍaj (now called al-Maṣlūlah),² by the wayside of the Saudi section of the route (see pl. 4).

1. The first inscription

This inscription has no date, diacritical points or ornamentation. It consists of seven lines incised in simple Kufic script on the same granite rock-face which accommodates the second inscription. This rock is located on the northern side of the main path of the pilgrim road which goes via the great pass of al-Maḍaj (al-Maṣlūlah). The whole text of the inscription is complete, legible and relatively well preserved; and it has been executed in an area measuring ca. 30 x 25 cm. (see pl. 1).

Text:

1. اللهم
2. اغفر
3. لمحمد
4. بن يعفر
5. كتبهما
6. قا
7. سم

1 For full information concerning this inland route, see al-Thenayian 2000.

2 This pass is an area through which the Yemeni highland pilgrim route cuts. It was the battlefield of the confrontation between the Abbasid governor Ma‘n b. Zā‘idah al-Shaybānī, appointed by the Caliph Abū Ja‘far al-Manṣūr (136–58/753–75), and ‘Umar b. Zayd al-Ghālibī. See al-Hamdānī 1986: 140, n. 515; al-Maḍaj 1988: 181, 184, 199, n. 40. For detailed accounts about the location of this defile, see al-Thenayian 2000: 54, 88–9, 143, 146, 194, 196, 201, 205.

Translation:

1. O God
2. grant forgiveness
3. to Muḥammad
4. bin Yu'fir.
5. He wrote them both
6. Qā
7. sim

1.1. *Commentary*

The inscription begins with a standard prayer for forgiveness (ll.1–2); it ends with the name of the scribe Qāsim (ll.6–7). Line five contains a dual form: ‘They both (i.e. this inscription and the second one) have been written by’. It seems unquestionable that the engraver, whose name is Qāsim, executed both these inscriptions. It can be deduced that the scribe, in using the dual suffix (*katabahumā*), was referring to this inscription and the second one. It seems likely that Qāsim, the engraver, started to inscribe the text of this inscription as soon as he had finished engraving inscription no. 1.

The name Qāsim, is not accompanied by further forenames or a *nisbah*, thus rendering any attempt at biographical or genealogical analysis futile. This name was very common in early times³ and is still in use today.

It should be noted that, in lines six and seven there is a natural horizontal crack bordering the last line of the text. It is perhaps for this reason that the engraver did not find enough space to add his other name(s) at the end of the text. As it is, Qāsim is broken over two lines written on the left-hand side of the last line 5.

This inscription bears the name of the second ruler of the Yu'firid dynasty, Muḥammad b. Yu'fir (ll.3–4) whose father was the founder of this dynasty. Judging by the context of the text (ll.1–2), it seems that this inscription was executed after Muḥammad's death in 269/882–3.

³ al-Janādī 1983–9: II, 64, 213, 321.

1.2 *The foundation of the Yu'firid Dynasty*

Yu'fir was a prominent tribal chief in the central area of the Yemen. His full name is Yu'fir b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥiwālī.⁴ The Banī Yu'fir were descended from the Tubba' Himyarite kings in the pre-Islamic era.⁵ Yu'fir is regarded as the founder of the Yu'firids (232-387/847-997) the first independent local dynasty in the Yemen.⁶ He was well known, especially among his own people, for his generosity, justice, tolerance and bravery in warfare.⁷

The city of Shibām (with the name of Kawkabān or Aqyān frequently added), and its surrounding areas, was the headquarters of the Yu'firid house.⁸ From this city, ca. 40 km. north-west of Ṣan'ā', Yu'fir b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān launched his political and military campaign against the Abbasid generals and governors. According to al-Hamdānī,⁹ the year 214/829-30 marks the foundation of the state of the Yu'firids.

In 227/841-2, Yu'fir b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥiwālī ordered his army, headed by Ṭarīf b. Thābit, to attack Ṣan'ā'. In due course the Abbasid governor of Ṣan'ā', Maṣṣūr b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Tanūkhī, succeeded in defeating Yu'fir's army before it was able to reach the city of Ṣan'ā'. The Yu'firid army was then compelled to retreat to its base in Shibām. Following the arrival of reinforcements from Iraq, al-Tanūkhī, attempted to launch a fresh attack on the Yu'firid capital, Shibām, but he failed owing to the unbreachable fortifications of the town.¹⁰

In 229/843-4, the Abbasid caliph, al-Wāthiq (227-232/841-7), sent a Persian general, Harthamah Shār Bāmiyān, known as al-Bashīr, with a military contingent to the Yemen. On arriving in Ṣan'ā', al-Bashīr continued towards the Yu'firid capital, Shibām, with the intention of conquering it and thereby bringing the Yu'firid dynasty to an end. Once again, however, the fortifications of Shibām proved too much for the Abbasid army. Consequently, Shār Bāmiyān decided to return to Ṣan'ā' and from there to Iraq.¹¹

4 For a full genealogy, including his offspring, see pl. 3.

5 al-Ḥakamī 1985: 4.

6 Smith 1983: 55; Smith 1987: 130.

7 al-Hamdānī 1986: 85, 180f.

8 For detailed information regarding this city and its vicinity, see al-Hamdānī 1974: 86, 231f.; Wilson 1989: 198; Smith 1982: 35f.

9 al-Hamdānī 1986: II, 90.

10 Ibn al-Dayba' 1971-7: 153f.; Smith 1983: 55.

11 al-Hamdānī 1986: I, 240f.; Ibn al-Dayba' 1971-7: 155; Smith. 1983: 55.

In 232/846–7 the Abbasid general Ja'far b. Dīnār, with his army, reached Ṣan'ā'. He laid siege to Shibām, but this siege came to an end with the news of the death of al-Wāthiq (d.232/847). Ibn Dīnār eventually succeeded in securing a truce with Yu'fir and thereupon returned to Ṣan'ā'.

During the reign of the caliph al-Mutawakkil (232–47/846–61), a new Abbasid general, Ḥimyar b. al-Ḥārith, made an effort to suppress the Yu'firid rebels in the central highland area of the Yemen. He was defeated and ultimately left the Yemen. As a result of this, the Yu'firids regained control over the city of Ṣan'ā'. Thus, the year 233/847–8 marks the rise of the Yu'firid dynasty headed by its founder Yu'fir b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥiwālī.¹² In 258/871–2, owing to his old age and infirmity, Yu'fir, decided to renounce his leadership of the state;¹³ he was succeeded by his son Muḥammad (II.3–4).

The last Yu'firid ruler was 'Abd Allāh b. Qaḥṭān b. 'Abd Allāh who died in Ibb in 387/997. His death marks the end of the Yu'firid dynasty.

It has been reported that the Yu'firid dynasty had only precarious control over a vast area of the central region of the Yemen (232–387/847–997), ranging between al-Janad in the south and Ṣa'dah in the north.¹⁴ The coin evidence¹⁵ shows clearly that the Yu'firid dynasty pledged allegiance to the Abbasids, mentioning the Caliphs' names on their coins in addition to their own.¹⁶

It should be mentioned that during the reign of the Yu'firids, the Yemen witnessed a power struggle between the Yu'firids and the first Zaydī imam, Yahya b. al-Ḥusayn known as *al-Ḥādī ila al-Ḥaqq*, (r. 245–298/859–91) on the one hand, and the Qarāmīṭah movement, headed by Maṣṣūr al-Yaman and 'Alī b. al-Faḍl (both died in 302/915) on the other.

1.3 Muḥammad b. Yu'fir (II.3–4)

As has already been mentioned, Muḥammad b. Yu'fir b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥiwālī now became the sole ruler of the Yu'firid dynasty.

12 al-Hamdānī 1986: I, 243f.; II, 180f.; al-Janādī 1983–9: I, 218f.; Lewcock and Smith 1973: 117.

13 Lewcock and Smith 1973: 117; Smith 1983: 55.

14 Kay 1892: 224, n.8; Smith 1987: 130.

15 Bikhazi 1970: 31f.

16 al-Hamdānī 1987: 114.

In 259/872–3, Muḥammad b. Yu'fir received a written diploma from Ṭalḥah b. al-Mutawakkil, who was acting on behalf of the Abbasid caliph, al-Mu'tamid. This letter served as formal acknowledgment of Muḥammad b. Yu'fir as ruler of the Yemen. In accordance with this letter, Muḥammad took the *bay'ah* which was concluded with the Abbasid caliph al-Mu'tamid; he also began the practice of having his name included in the official, religious addresses (pl. *al-khuttab*).¹⁷

He chose the city of Shibām as his seat, rather than the city of Ṣan'ā' where, it is reported, he had constructed its walls. He started to accrue wealth for the state by increasing taxation and relying heavily for revenue on the silver-mine of al-Raḍrād.¹⁸

In 262/875–6, following a violent flood which swept through Ṣan'ā', Muḥammad b. Yu'fir set out on pilgrimage to Mecca. Before his departure, he designated his son Ibrāhīm (see the second inscription below) as his deputy. In 265/878–9 on Muḥammad's return from Mecca, he ordered the rebuilding of the Great Mosque (*jāmi'*) of Ṣan'ā'.¹⁹ In the same year, Muḥammad decided to retire from office and instead devoted himself entirely to contemplation and religion. Ibrāhīm, Muḥammad's son, became the next ruler.²⁰ In 269/882–3, however, Ibrāhīm callously murdered his father inside the minaret of the Shibām *jāmi'*.²¹

During the reign of Muḥammad b. Yu'fir b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥiwālī the main cities of the Yemen, such as Ṣan'ā' and al-Janad and including Ḥaḍramawt, were under the jurisdiction of the Yu'firids. Muḥammad pledged allegiance to the rulers of Tihāmah, the Banī Ziyād, and payed them an annual tribute (*al-kharāj*).²² Al-Hamdānī²³ links the sacking and total destruction of the silver-mine of al-Raḍrād, which was an important source of wealth for the Yu'firids, with the assassination of Muḥammad b. Yu'fir, which he dates to 270/883.

17 Ibn al-Dayba' 1971–7, I: 161f.; al-Janadī 1983–9: I, 229.

18 Smith 1983: 55.

19 al-Rāzī 1981: 518f.; al-Janadī 1983–9: I, 230; al-Marūnī 1988: 36.

20 Ibn al-Dayba' 1971–7: I, 163; Smith 1983: 55.

21 al-Janadī 1983–9: I, 230; Lewcock and Smith 1973: 117.

22 Ibn al-Dayba' 1971–7: I, 162; al-Janadī 1983: I, 229.

23 al-Hamdānī 1987: 13, 89–92; al-Hamdānī 1974: 151f.; Smith 1987: 131.

2. The second inscription

This inscription is in similar style to the first and has been engraved on the same smooth, granite rock-face overlooking the main path of the pilgrim route on the pass of al-Mandaj. It is in six lines and the entire text area measures about 35 x 45 cm. Except for the second word in line two and the last word in line four, the text of the inscription is legible. It is complete and fairly well preserved (see pl. 2).

Text:

1. بسم الله الرحمن
2. الرحيم (أقر) (أ) الله
3. الامير ابر(أ) هيم بن
4. محمد بن يعفر و(اهداه)
5. و امتع به و كتب
6. قاسم

Translation:

1. In the name of God, the Compassionate
2. the Merciful. May God assign
3. Amīr Ibrāhīm bin
4. Muḥammad bin Yu'fir and (may God) guide him
5. and (may God allow the believers to) profit by him, and wrote (this)
6. Qāsim

2.1 Commentary

The first line and the first word in the second line consist of the popular religious opening invocation (the *Basmalah*).

Apart from the opening invocation (ll.1-2), this inscription contains several optative phrases with reference to the subject. These phrases are أقر or اعز (1.2), اهداه (1.4), and امتع (1.5). The phrases اعز and امتع are both attested epigraphically.²⁴

²⁴ Grohmann 1962: 113, Z-179, pl. xxiii, 2.; Miles 1948: pl. xviii.

The second word in line two is unclear. However, in addition to the interpretation presented above in the text, the word could be read as *اعز* or *امر*.²⁵ In the last word in line 4, the second and third letters are illegible. The appropriate reading, if textual continuity is to be maintained, is as given in the text above.

This inscription contains, in line 3, the contemporary formal title of the Yu'firid ruler, Amīr Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Yu'fir. Although Ibn al-Dayba²⁶ uses the title *amīr* when discussing the history of the Yu'firid dynasty, the word is ambiguous in its meaning, since it may be taken to signify a prince, a governor, or a military commander.²⁷

In contrast to the first inscription, the content of this inscription leads us to assume that the scribe, Qāsīm (1.6), executed it during the reign of Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Yu'fir, the third ruler of the Yu'firid dynasty (262–282/875–895).

2.2 Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Yu'fir (ll.3–4)

Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Yu'fir was the grandson of the founder of the Yu'firid dynasty, Yu'fir b. 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Ḥiwālī (see pl. 3, below). He is commonly known in Yemeni history by his *kunya*, Abū Yu'fir.

As we saw above in 262/875–6, Muḥammad b. Yu'fir handed over the reins of power during his absence to his son Ibrāhīm. Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad then exercised authority as vice-regent for his father and when Muḥammad b. Yu'fir abdicated, became the sole official ruler of the dynasty in (265/878–9).

Al-Hamdānī²⁸ briefly describes the personality of Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad, stating that whenever he became intoxicated he behaved immorally, but when sober he expounded intellectual and moral theories. Ibrāhīm achieved a great deal of adverse publicity by committing the crime of patricide in 269/882–3.

According to al-Hamdānī,²⁹ it was Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad's addiction to alcohol that caused him to kill both his father, Muḥammad, and his uncle, Muḥammad's brother, Aḥmad. It is also believed that this killing was engineered by the old man

25 Littmann 1949: 22, inscription no. 27; 24, inscription no. 30.

26 Ibn al-Dayba' 1971–7: I, 162.

27 Kay 1892: 223.

28 al-Hamdānī 1986: II, 182. See also al-Hamdānī 1974: 83.

29 al-Hamdānī 1986: II, 182.

Yu'fir b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān who was either unhappy at seeing his son Muḥammad desist from further participation in the affairs of state, or wished to ensure that his son would never again wield political power.³⁰

As an immediate reaction to the cruel assassination of Muḥammad b. Yu'fir, a number of local Yemeni tribes rose up and revolted against Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad. Before leaving Ṣan'ā', Ibrāhīm placed his son 'Abd al-Raḥmān in charge as governor in Ṣan'ā'. He dismissed him in 273/886.³¹

In 279/892–3, the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, al-Mu'tamid, despatched a governor, 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, known as Juftan, to the Yemen in order to strengthen the grip of the Yu'firids on the area. According to Ibn al-Daybā',³² the new Abbasid governor met with resistance headed by one of Ibrāhīm's allies, Ibn al-Du'ām, before he entered the city of Ṣan'ā'. At the same time, it is reported that before the arrival of 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, the city had erupted in violence perpetrated by the joint forces of the Abnā' and the Bani Shihāb. They compelled Ibrāhīm's governor to leave the city of Ṣan'ā' before they set Ibrāhīm's residence on fire.

In 282/895 when 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn departed from the Yemen, Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad regained power while he was staying in Shibām.³³ According to al-Janādī,³⁴ he held authority for just a short time before being assassinated in Shibām (d. 282/895). He was succeeded by his son, As'ad (d. 344/955).

During the last years of Ibrāhīm's rule and that of his son As'ad, the Yu'firid state reached the limits of its expansion. Ibrāhīm maintained the alliances with the rulers of Tihāmah, the Banī Ziyād.³⁵

3 Palaeography

3.1. Muḥammad b. Yu'fir's Inscription

The letters here are more or less clumsily inscribed. The most striking features of this inscription are as follows:

30 Smith 1983: 55. Smith 1987: 130.

31 Smith 1983: 55. Smith 1987: 133.

32 Ibn al-Daybā' 1971–7: I, 163f.; cf. Smith 1983: 55.

33 Bikhazi 1970: 39.

34 al-Janādī 1983–9: I, 231.

35 Kay 1892: 225, n.8; Bikhazi 1970: 38f.

Hā’ (medial, l.3): the letter *hā’* in the name Muḥammad is chiselled with an arc-shape descending below the base-line.

‘Ayn (medial, l.4): the letter *‘ayn* in the name Yu‘fir occurs in a triangular shape. This particular form of the letter *‘ayn* appears in a tombstone inscription dated 246/ 861.³⁶

Fā’ (medial, ll.2, 4): the medial *fā’* in the word *ighfir* and the name Yu‘fir is engraved in a circular shape, resting on the base-line. The form of this letter is similar to the medial *fā’* in the Mu‘āwiyah/al-Ṭā’if inscription, dated 58/677–8.³⁷

Mīm (medial, ll.3,5): the letter *mīm* is incised in a semicircular shape, resting on the base-line. The form of this medial *mīm* is parallel to that in the ‘Abd al-Malik inscription, dated 73/692.³⁸

Hā’ (medial, l.1): the letter *hā’* in the word *Allahumma* is engraved in a roundish shape intersected by the base-line. This form is parallel to the letter *hā’* in a rock inscription discovered in Wadi Khashnah in Saudi Arabia, dated 56/675–6.³⁹

3.2. Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Yu‘fir’s inscription

Of orthographical interest, the word *al-Rahmān* (l.1) is here inscribed in accordance with the Qur’ānic style of writing it. The medial *alif*, lengthening the vowel in the name Ibrāhīm (l.3), that is without the medial *alif*, is also omitted here. The omission of the medial *alif* is the norm in early Arabic orthography; and is frequently found in the Qur’ān. The word *Allāh* in l.2 has the initial *alif* missing.

Owing to the relative smoothness of the rock-face on which this inscription is incised, the letters are engraved more elegantly compared with those of the first inscription which was doubtlessly carved by the same scribe, Qāsīm. This inscription is beautifully executed and the letter forms, for example the initial *alif*, the final *bā’*, the medial *‘ayn*, the medial *fā’*, and the medial *hā’* resemble those of the former inscription.

Further striking features of this inscription are as follows:

Hā’ (medial, ll.1, 2, 4): the letter *hā’* is incised with a small body, slanting into the base-line. The medial *hā’* (l.4) in the name Muhammad intersects the writing line.

36 Schneider 1986: pl. II, 4.

37 Miles 1948: 240, fig. 1, pl. xviii, A.

38 Sharon 1966: 367, pl. 1; Hamidullah 1939: 434f., pls. 8 and 10.

39 Sharafaddīn 1977: 69f., pl. 50, A.B.

This form of the letter *ḥā'* is similar to that employed in the 'Abbāsah inscription, dated 71/691.⁴⁰

Sīn (medial, ll.1, 6): the medial *sīn* in the word *bi'sm* and the name Qāsim is engraved with plain, blunt indentations; the teeth rest on the base-line. The shape of this letter corresponds with that occurring on a tombstone dated 341/952.⁴¹

'Ayn (final, l.5): the final *'ayn* occurs with a triangular head. Its tail is swept at an angle to the right-hand side below the base line. Such a form has been attested in a tombstone inscription discovered in the settlement of al-Sirrayn in Saudi Arabia, dated 379/990.⁴²

Kāf (initial, l.5): the body of the initial *kāf* is engraved with its length parallel to the base line. The upper shaft of the letter stands perpendicularly. This way of writing the letter *kāf* is similar to that demonstrated in the Mu'āwiyah/al-Ṭā'if inscription, dated 58/677–8.⁴³

Mīm: the letter *mīm* is incised in this inscription inconsistently and occurs mainly in two forms, triangular or rounded. While the initial *mīm* is either triangular (l.3) or rounded (ll. 4,5), in medial form it is triangular (ll. 1,4), while in final form, it is triangular (ll.1, 2) or rounded (ll.3, 6). The triangular *mīm* is to be found in a graffito dated 177/793–4.⁴⁴ The rounded *mīm* is to be found in an inscription on a tombstone dated 289/902.⁴⁵

Nūn (final, ll.1, 3, 4): the final *nūn* in the name *al-Raḥmān* and the word *ibn* is incised with a flattish body, the lower part of which curves slightly to the left, descending below the base line. This form of the letter is to be found on a tombstone dated to the 1st–3rd/7th–9th centuries.⁴⁶

Hā' (final, ll. 1, 2, 5): in this inscription two contrasting versions represent the letter *hā'*. The first, engraved on the base-line (ll.2, 5), is triangular in form but here the vertical shaft is missing. In l.1 the final *hā'* is strictly triangular in form. It has a vertical shaft which stems from the base-line. The style of the former *hā'*, including its position, is similar to the Ḥajrī inscription, dated 31/652,⁴⁷ whilst the form of the

40 Hawary 1932: pl. 1.

41 Grohmann 1957: pl. 1.

42 al-Zayla'ī 1983: 382f, pl. 31, no. 46.

43 Miles 1948: 240, pl. xviii, A.

44 Lüttmann 1949: 5f., inscription no. 5.

45 Miles 1957: 224, fig. 11.

46 al-Bāshā 1979: 84f., inscription no. 1, pl. 23, fig. 3.

47 Hawary 1930: pl. iii.

latter *hā'* occurs occasionally in the 3rd/9th century, and more often in the 4th–5th/10th–11th centuries.⁴⁸

Lām-alif (initial, I.3): the ligature *lām-alif* in the word *al-amīr* is engraved in a criss-cross pattern with a triangular base resting on the base-line. Apart from the shaft, the triangular base of this letter is similar to that in an inscription dated 207/823.⁴⁹

To sum up, it is safe to conclude that these two inscriptions can be dated to the last quarter of the third/ninth century (i.e. 269–282/ 882–895); and that they are the only epigraphical evidence, relating to the Yu'firid dynasty of the Yemen found so far on the inland pilgrim routes in Arabia.

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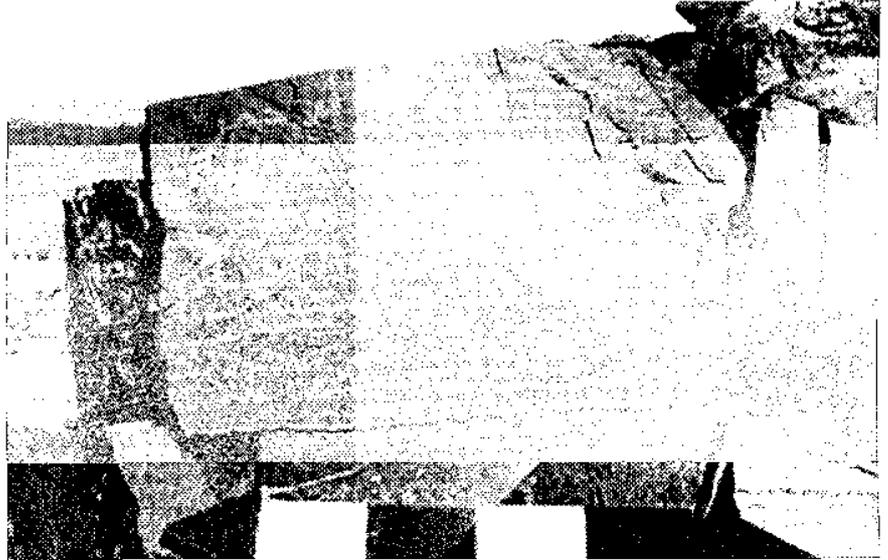
48 Grohmann 1962: 4f., Z–4, pl. ii, 2.

49 Littmann 1949: 6f., inscription no. 6.

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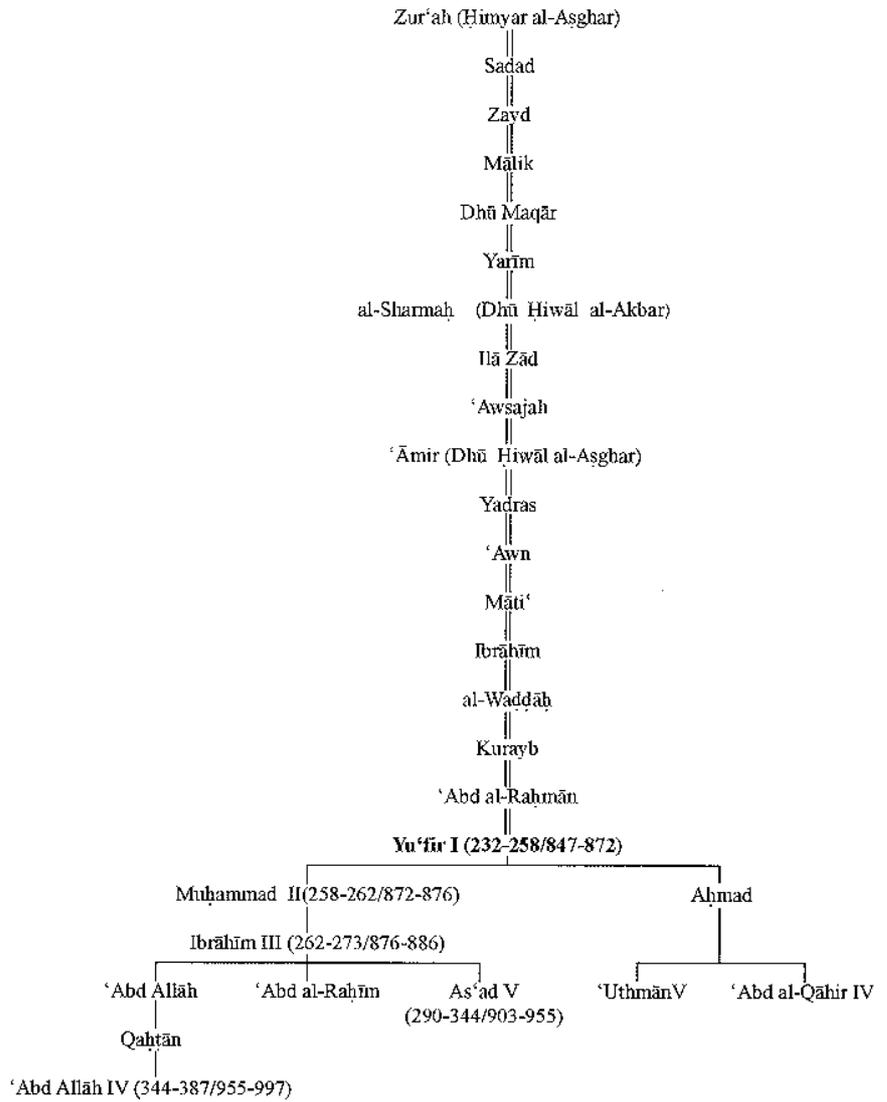
Plate 1. Inscription no.1: the Pass of al-Mandaj/al-Maṣṭūlah, the Saudi section of the Yemeni highland pilgrim route



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ
الَّذِي هَدَانَا
لِهَذَا الْبَلَدِ
الْقُدْسِيِّ
وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ
الَّذِي هَدَانَا
لِهَذَا الْبَلَدِ
الْقُدْسِيِّ
وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ
الَّذِي هَدَانَا
لِهَذَا الْبَلَدِ
الْقُدْسِيِّ

Plate 2. Inscription no. 2: the Pass of al-Mandaj/al-Mašlūlah, the Saudi section of the Yemeni highland pilgrim route

The Yu'firid House



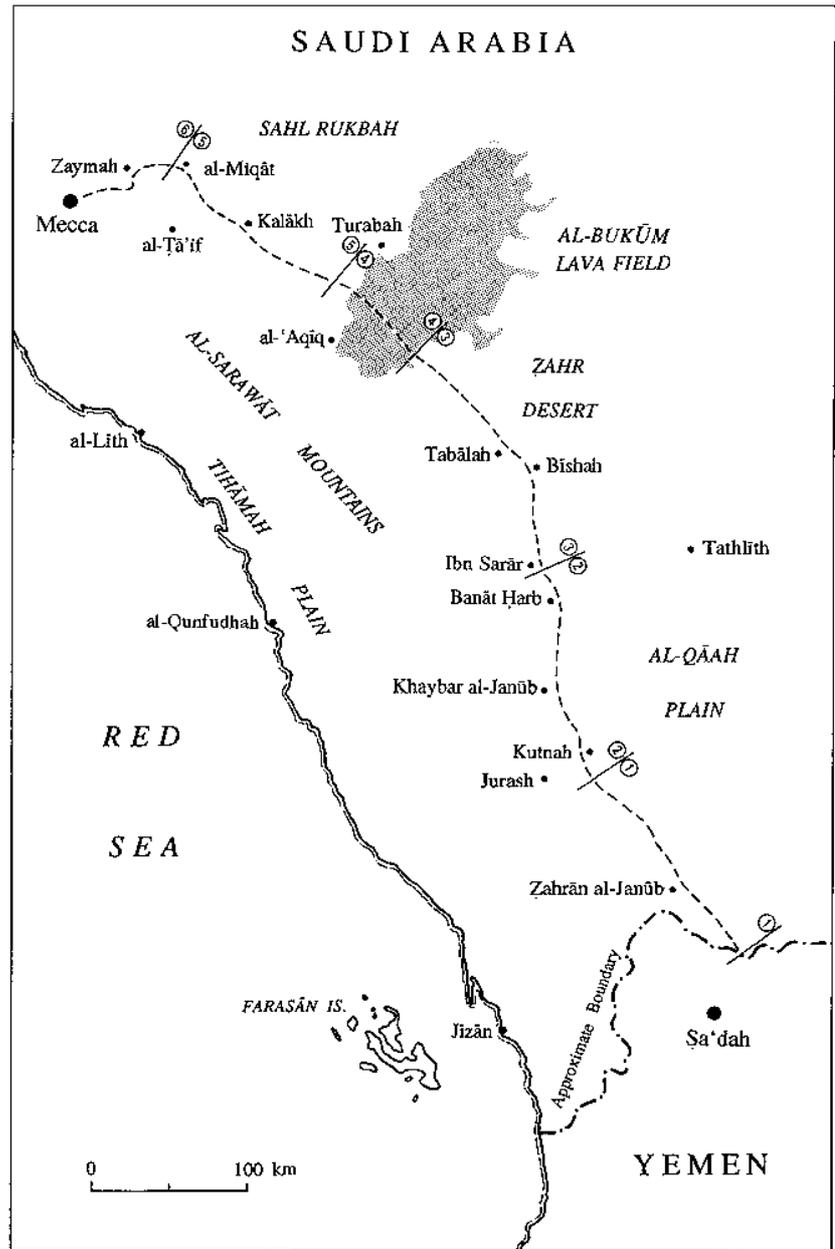


Plate 4. A map showing the location of the two inscriptions at the Pass of al-Mandaj/al-Maslūlah, the Saudi section of the Yemeni highland pilgrim route (al-Thenayian 2000)