

ARABIC LETTERS ON THE FACADE OF THE TEL ARZA BURIAL CAVE

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Five Arabic letters were engraved on the facade of the Second Temple period burial cave in the Tel Arza neighborhood (see Wiegman and Baruch, this volume), on the upper right corner of the northern *metope* (Fig. 1).¹ The first, third and fifth letters are thick, while the second letter and part of the last one are thin. Four letters are small (0.9 cm high, 1.2 cm wide) and one is large (1 cm high, 2.2 cm wide). The letters do not seem to form a coherent word.

The first letter, a *jim*, *ha* or *ḥa*, is triangular in shape, similar to that of the third letter. A similar shape of *jim*, *ha* or *ḥa* was found on an early 'Abbasid inscription from Ashqelon, dated 152–200 AH/767–815 CE (*CIAP* I:148, Fig. 56).

The second letter is a *mīm*. A similar letter appears in an embroidered inscription on the *tirāz* of Marwān. The text of this inscription could refer to Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān I (684–685 CE) or more likely, to Marwān ibn Muḥammad, known as Marwān II (744–750 CE). It seems to originate from the *tirāz* workshops of Ifriqiya (in modern Tunisia; see Gruendler 1993:16, No. E6; for the shape of the letter, see p. 99:E6).



Fig. 1. The inscription.

¹ The inscription was photographed by Alexander Wiegmann and transcribed by the author.

The fourth letter is large and can be either a *mīm* or *ṣād*. If it is a *mīm*, it is similar to the *mīm* on the earliest Arabic inscription recovered from a tomb in Egypt, dated to 652 CE (Gruendler 1993:15, No. E1; for the shape of the letter, see p. 99:E1). If the letter is *ṣād*, it resembles that which occurs on a milestone from Abu Gosh, dated to the reign of the Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (685–705 CE) or his son, al-Walīd (705–715 CE; see Gruendler 1993:19–20, No. E16; for the shape of the letter, see p. 71:E16).

CONCLUSIONS

The inscription discussed above is the only appearance of a row of Arabic letters on a facade of a Second Temple period burial cave. Based on the shape of the letters and their parallels, the inscription can be dated from the seventh to the early ninth century CE; the latest feature being the triangular shape of the letter *jim*, *ha* or *ḥa*, which appears twice.

REFERENCES

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