

Abraham J. Drewes & Jacques Ryckmans

Les inscriptions sudarabes sur bois

dans la collection de l'Oosters Instituut
conservées dans la bibliothèque universitaire de Leiden

Texte révisé et adapté par Peter Stein,

édité par

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PREFACE

In 1993, the Leiden based Foundation “Het Oosters Instituut” acquired a large collection of inscribed wooden sticks from pre-Islamic Yemen. These sticks contain the everyday correspondence of the Sabeans and Mineans, peoples belonging to the so-called Ancient South Arabian civilization that existed from the early first millennium BC up to the sixth century AD in the southern half of the Arabian Peninsula. This collection, which has been given on loan to the Leiden University Library, is one of only three major collections of this sort in the world. The two other collections are located in the Bavarian State Library in Munich (Germany) and in two museums in the Yemeni capital Ṣan‘ā’, respectively. The inscribed sticks in these three collections originate from one single place, Nashshān, an ancient city in the Wadi al-Jawf in the north of Yemen, thus representing a pre-Islamic South Arabian public archive with a chronological continuity of over almost 1500 years. The inscribed sticks show a broad variety of text genres such as letters, legal and business documents, records from religious practice and scribal education and for this reason the collection can be considered quite unique in the Ancient Near East.

The members of the board of “Het Oosters Instituut”, aware of the extraordinary scientific importance of this material, bought this collection in 1993. Some months later the board invited two renowned scholars to study the language and texts on these sticks: Professor Abraham J. Drewes, emeritus from Leiden University and a specialist in South Semitic languages and epigraphy as well as comparative Semitic linguistics, and Professor Jacques Ryckmans, emeritus from Louvain University, world famous expert in Epigraphic South Arabian languages. They accepted to work on these inscriptions and hoped to publish the entire collection in due course of time. Drewes and Ryckmans knew very well that they were facing an enormous scientific challenge since the knowledge of the language and content of the sticks in those days was still in its infancy. They started to cooperate in this project in September 1994. From that time onwards Ryckmans travelled to Leiden to spend one full week each month with Drewes in order to work on this material. The two scholars spent a total of 39 weeks, spread over five years, studying the sticks in a separate room at the Leiden University Library while deciphering, transcribing, reading and re-reading these texts. From mid-1999 onwards health problems made it impossible for Ryckmans to continue his study weeks in Leiden, yet he kept a keen interest in the project and encouraged Drewes to go on. Jacques Ryckmans died on the 24th of January 2005. Two and a half years later, on the 19th of October 2007, his colleague and friend Abraham Drewes passed away. He left a computer file of a manuscript behind, together with the testamentary instruction to me to have it published after his death.

Drewes and Ryckmans were real pioneers. In the period 1994–2000 the Leiden collection was the only one that was systematically studied. Research projects on the two other stick collections started in the early 2000s; the first results of these

have meanwhile been published.¹ It goes without saying that these publications owe much to Drewes' and Ryckmans' results from their long-term work on the Leiden collection, results that they had made public in a number of articles and conference talks from 1993 until 2001 (cf. the bibliography on p. xxii). By their untimely death however, the main objective of their cooperative work, a publication of a catalogue and texts of the entire Leiden sticks collection, had not been achieved.

As the former president of the Foundation "Het Oosters Instituut", I contacted Dr. Peter Stein (Jena) in 2008 and asked him whether he was in a position to finalize the Drewes-Ryckmans manuscript. Why I asked Dr. Stein was obvious: in those days, and still today, he is one of the very few scholars with an impressive knowledge of South Arabian epigraphy in general and with specialized knowledge of the inscribed sticks in particular. By his work on the Munich stick collection he had acquired a thorough experience with Sabean and Minean texts. In 2009 he finished his research project on the Munich collection and published half of the total of the Munich sticks in 2010.

Dr. Stein agreed to undertake a careful revision of the Drewes-Ryckmans manuscript and to update the material in light of the present state of research. This work, which included a thorough check-up of all transliterations in the Drewes-Ryckmans manuscript, comparing them with photographs, but also with the originals, was done between 2009 and 2011, resulting in the present book.² Dr. Stein took great care to keep the work of Drewes and Ryckmans intact wherever possible. He was, at the same time, able to enrich their manuscript with notes and corrections that he carefully marked as such.

The manuscript contains a complete catalogue of the entire collection, comprising 343 texts,³ plus 43 modern fakes and one anepigraph, accompanied by the (revised) transliterations as well as critical notes to the text. Though there are neither translations nor philological comments in it, the book is of the greatest importance simply because it doubles the number of accessible texts on sticks from South Arabia.

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- 1 Two ground-breaking books have been published: the first one being the impressive work by Peter Stein, *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelinschriften auf Holzstäbchen aus der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in München. Band 1. Die Inschriften der mittel- und spätsabäischen Periode*, Tübingen / Berlin 2010 (comprising the first half of that collection with 205 texts) and the second one being the wonderful book by Mohammed Maraqtan, *Altsüdarabische Texte auf Holzstäbchen. Epigraphische und kulturhistorische Untersuchungen*, Beirut 2014 (with 100 texts from the collection of the National Museum in Ṣanʿāʾ).
 - 2 Cf. already P. Stein, "Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelinschriften auf Holzstäbchen in der Sammlung des Oosters Instituut in Leiden." In I. Gerlach (ed.), *South Arabia and its Neighbours. Phenomena of Intercultural Contacts. 14. Rencontres Sabéennes*. Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen 14, Wiesbaden 2015, 193–211.
 - 3 Among them three inscriptions in the possession of the Leiden University Library. These three, published at the end of the catalogue, are numbered UB, A=OR 23.127 A; UB, B=Or.23.127 B; and UB, C=OR 23.127 C – in contrast to the sticks from the Oosters Instituut which bear the siglum L.

It is a pleasure to mention here that the excellent photographs by Wim Vreeburg (former photographer at the Leiden University Library) are used in this publication.⁴ They will enable the reader to verify the transliterations. But these photographs are also extremely helpful for those who study Jacques Ryckmans' fundamental article on the palaeographical development of the Ancient South Arabian cursive script,⁵ a study that was based mainly on examples from the Leiden collection, and for those who study the article on the C14 dating of sticks, equally based on specimina from the Leiden collection.⁶

On behalf of those who work in the field of Epigraphic South Arabian and Semitic epigraphy I want to thank the members of the former board of "Het Oosters Instituut": Dr. Emeri van Donzel, Prof. Hans de Bruijn, Prof. Remke Kruk and Drs. Ted Lagro for their decision, back in 1993, to acquire these sticks and put them at the disposal of scientific research. It is thanks to their scientific open-minds that this project came into being.

We also thank the former boards of "Het Oosters Instituut" for financing hotel costs and travel expenses of Prof. Ryckmans; we thank the actual board of "Het Oosters Instituut" for financing the publication of this book with Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden.

The board of "Het Oosters Instituut" expresses deep respect and gratitude towards the late professors Drewes and Ryckmans for their pioneer work in this field, as well as to Peter Stein, who, by his great competence in this field, made it possible to bring this very difficult task to completion. This book could not have been published without him. Special thanks are given to our colleague and friend, the Yemen specialist Ronald E. Kon whose scientific input and practical support was of crucial importance at the beginning of this project. We thank all others who, in various ways and from different angles, were involved in this project over the years: our colleagues Léon Buskens, Nico van den Boogert, Maarten Kossmann, Petra Sijpesteijn and Ahmad al-Jallad, as well as Marianne Nolten. All of them showed deep interest in this project. Their support and encouragement was highly appreciated. The institute's thanks go also to the Leiden University Library staff: Arnoud Vrolijk, Hans van de Velde, Wim Vreeburg and Jan Just Witkam. Finally we thank Madame Annie Devergnas for her meticulous translation of Dr. Stein's English remarks into French.

4 It should be noted that not all inscriptions are illustrated by a photograph in the present edition. The editors have chosen only those pictures for publication of which they expected real benefit for the reader who wants to verify the given transliterations. The photographs of L 052 (first picture), L 056, L 099, L 124 (first and last picture), L 157, L 262, and L 289 (first picture) have been added by P. Stein.

5 J. Ryckmans, "Origin and evolution of South Arabian minuscule writing on wood (1)." *Arabian Archaeology and epigraphy* 12 (2001), 223–235.

6 A. J. Drewes / T.F.G. Higham / M.C.A. Macdonald / C. Bronk Ramsey, "Some absolute dates for the development of the Ancient South Arabian minuscule script." *Arabian archaeology and epigraphy* 24 (2013), 196–207.

The study of South Arabian inscriptions on wood is without any doubt one of the new scientific challenges in the field of Semitic epigraphy. This book, containing authentic documents from pre-Islamic Arabia, will greatly contribute to enrich our knowledge of its language and culture.

Moreover it will not only make an important collection known to a broader scholarly public, but also stand as a testimony to the fundamental achievements of Professor Drewes and Professor Ryckmans in the field of Ancient South Arabian epigraphy.

Harry Stroomer

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Member of the board of "Het Oosters Instituut"