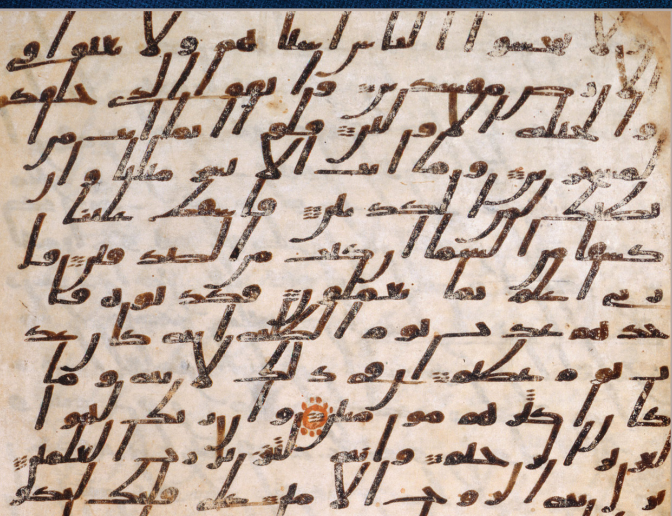


SCRIPTS AND SCRIPTURE

Writing and Religion in
Arabia circa 500–700 CE



Edited by Fred M. Donner and
Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee



THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
LATE ANTIQUE AND MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC NEAR EAST • NUMBER 3

SCRIPTS AND SCRIPTURE

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Late Antique and Medieval Islamic Near East (LAMINE)

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Top right: Standing stone with image of Šlm and Taymanitic text
(photo by Michael C. A. Macdonald; see page 21)

Bottom: “Linteau avec inscription dadanite—Al-’Ula sanctuaire de Dadan” by Zunkir, CC BY-SA 4.0
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List of Abbreviations and Sigla

Sigla are in boldface.

AH	H. ‘A. D. Abū ‘l-Ḥasan. <i>Qirā’ah li-kitābāt liḥyāniyyah min ḡabal ‘akmah bi-minṭaqat al-‘ulā</i> . Riyadh: Maktabat al-malik fahd al-waṭaniyyah, 1997
AH	<i>Anno Hegirae</i> , in the year of the Hijra
ANA	Ancient North Arabian
ArNab	Inscriptions from al-‘Arniyyāt published in Lāila Nehmé, ed., <i>The Darb al-Bakrah: A Caravan Route in North-West Arabia Discovered by Ali I. al-Ghabban—Catalogue of the Inscriptions</i> . A Series of Archaeological Refereed Studies 50. Riyadh: Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, 2018
ARNA.Nab	Frederick V. Winnett and William L. Reed, <i>Ancient Records from North Arabia</i> . Near and Middle East Series 6. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970
B Ia	one of several styles of Qur’ānic script as identified by F. Déroche
BCE	before the Common Era
Bron1999	François Bron, “Une statuette en bronze à inscription en vieil-arabe.” <i>Semitica</i> 49 (1999): 171–77
ca.	<i>circa</i> , about, approximately
CA	Classical Arabic
CE	Common Era
cf.	<i>confer/conferatur</i> , compare
ch(s).	chapter(s)
CIH	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Himyariticarum, CIS pars IV</i>
CIS	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum, pars II, Inscriptiones Aramaicas continens</i> . Paris, 1889
col(s).	column(s)
CSAI	Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions
d.	died
DaJ	Inscriptions from Dūmat al-Jandal
Dan.	Daniel (biblical book)
DASI	Digital Archive for the Study of pre-Islamic Arabian Inscriptions
DBv1Nab and DBv3Nab	Inscriptions from sites Darb al-Bakrah various 1 and various 3 published in Lāila Nehmé, ed., <i>The Darb al-Bakrah: A Caravan Route in North-West Arabia Discovered by Ali I. al-Ghabban—Catalogue of the Inscriptions</i> . A Series of Archaeological Refereed Studies 50. Riyadh: Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, 2018
ed.	edition, editor, edited by
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
ESA	Epigraphic South Arabian

esp.	especially
Ex.	Exodus (biblical book)
FB-Wādī Šuḍayf	François Bron, “Quatre inscriptions sabéennes provenant d’un temple de Dhū-Samawī.” <i>Syria</i> 74 (1997): 73–80
fig(s).	figure(s)
fol.	folio
Hag.	Haggai (biblical book)
HNNUT	Kh. al-Ḥā’itī, <i>Al-nuqūš al-nabaṭiyyah fī al-manāṭiq al-wāqī’ah bayna muḥā-faḏatay al-‘ulā wa taymā’</i> . Silsilat dirāsāt ‘aṭariyyah muḥakkamah 35. Riyadh: Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, 2016
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
Ja 525	In Albert Jamme, “Inscriptions sud-arabes de la collection Ettore Rossi.” <i>Rivista degli studi orientali</i> 30, no. 1/2 (1955): 103–30.
Ja 2147	In Albert Jamme, <i>Sabaean Inscriptions from Maḥram Bilqīs (MāRib)</i> . Publications of the American Foundation for the Study of Man 3. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962
Josh.	Joshua (biblical book)
JSNab	Antonin Jaussen and R. Savignac, <i>Mission archéologique en Arabie</i> . 5 vols. Publications de la Société française des fouilles archéologiques 2. Paris: Geuthner, 1909–22
KJV	King James Version (of the Bible)
Kortler 4	In Walter W. Müller, “Sabäische Felsinschriften von der jemenitischen Grenze zur Rub‘ al-Ḥālī.” <i>Neue Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik</i> 3 (1978): 113–36
l(l).	line(s)
LAMINE	Late Antique and Medieval Islamic Near East series
Lev.	Leviticus (biblical book)
LPArab	Enno Littmann, <i>Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1904–1905</i> . Div. 4, <i>Semitic Inscriptions</i> . Sec. D, <i>Arabic Inscriptions</i> . Leiden: Brill, 1949
MAIS	Kh. al-Muaikil, “Naqṣān ‘arabiyyān mubakkirān min sakāka.” <i>Addarah</i> 19, no. 3 (1993): 112–31
Matt.	Matthew (biblical book)
mp	masculine plural
ms	masculine singular
MS	Inscriptions from Madā’in Šālīḥ
MŠM 7250	In Ibrāhīm al-Šilwī and Fahmī al-Aghbarī, “Naqṣ Jadīd Min Nuqūš Al-I‘tirāf Al ‘alanī Min Ma‘bad ĠRW.” <i>Adūmātū</i> 25 (2013): 51–58
München 94-317880	In Muḥammad ‘A. Bāfaqīh, “Dū Yağruwwa-Amīrwa-Ḥanānfiḏaw’ al-nuqūš.” In <i>Arabia Felix: Beiträge zur Sprache und Kultur des vorislamischen Arabien—Festschrift Walter W. Müller zum 60. Geburtstag</i> , edited by Norbert Nebes, 21–38. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994
n(n).	note(s)
n.d.	no date
Neh.	Nehemiah (biblical book)

no(s).	number(s)
n.s.	new series
Num.	Numbers (biblical book)
OA	Old Arabic
OCIANA	Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia
O I	an early style of Qur'ānic script, as identified by F. Déroche
OSA	Old South Arabian
PERF 558	oldest surviving Arabic papyrus
pers. comm.	personal communication
p(p).	page(s)
pl(s).	plate(s)
plur.	plural
Ps.	Psalm (chapter in biblical book of Psalms)
pt(s).	part(s)
Q.	Qur'ān
QNNab	Inscriptions from Qā' an-Naqayb published in Lāila Nehmé, ed., <i>The Darb al-Bakrah: A Caravan Route in North-West Arabia Discovered by Ali I. al-Ghabban—Catalogue of the Inscriptions</i> . A Series of Archaeological Refereed Studies 50. Riyadh: Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, 2018
RES	<i>Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique</i>
S	Inscriptions from Sakākā
Šan'ā' 2004-1	In Alessia Priolella, "Evidence from a New Inscription Regarding the Goddess 't(t)rm and Some Remarks on the Gender of Deities in South Arabia." <i>Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies</i> 42 (2012): 309–18
SBNab	Inscriptions from Sūḥ al-Baghlah published in Lāila Nehmé, ed., <i>The Darb al-Bakrah: A Caravan Route in North-West Arabia Discovered by Ali I. al-Ghabban—Catalogue of the Inscriptions</i> . A Series of Archaeological Refereed Studies 50. Riyadh: Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, 2018
scil.	<i>scilicet</i> , that is to say, namely
sec(s).	section(s)
Šilwī Šudayf (al-Šilwī)	In Ibrāhim al-Šilwī, "Naqš ḡadīd min nuqūš al-i'tirāf." <i>Al-Ta'riḥ wa-l-aṭār</i> 1 (1993): 4–6
sing.	singular
s.v(v).	<i>sub verbo(verbis)</i> , under the word(s)
ThMNN	S. Al-Theeb, <i>Mudawwanat al-nuqūš al-nabaṭiyyah fī'l-mamlakah al-ʿarabiyyah al-saʿūdiyyah</i> . Riyadh: Dārat al-malik ʿAbdul ʿAzīz, 2010
ThNIS	S. Al-Theeb, "New Nabataean Inscriptions from the Site of al-Sij in the Region of al-ʿUlā, Saudi Arabia." <i>Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies</i> 41 (2011): 349–70
ThNJUT	S. Al-Theeb, <i>Nuqūš nabaṭiyyah fī al-jawf, al-ʿulā, taymāʾ, al-mamlakah al-ʿarabiyyah al-suʿūdiyyah</i> . Riyadh: Maṭbūʿāt maktabat al-malik Fahd al-waṭaniyyah, 2005
ThNS	S. Al-Theeb, <i>Nuqūš mawqiʿ sarmadāʾ muḥāfazat taymāʾ</i> . Riyadh: Jāmiʿat al-malik Saʿūd, kulliyyat as-siyāḥah wa-l-ʾaṭār, 2014
trans.	translation, translator, translated by

TS	Inscriptions from the Taymā' Survey
UJadhNab	Inscriptions from Umm Jadhāyidh published in Lāila Nehmé, ed., <i>The Darb al-Bakrah: A Caravan Route in North-West Arabia Discovered by Ali I. al-Ghabban—Catalogue of the Inscriptions</i> . A Series of Archaeological Refereed Studies 50. Riyadh: Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, 2018
v(v).	verse(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)
vs.	versus
YM 10703	In Muḥammad 'A. Bāfaqih, "Dū Yaḡruwwa-Amīrwa-Ḥanānfīdaw' al-nuqūš." In <i>Arabia Felix: Beiträge zur Sprache und Kultur des vorislamischen Arabien—Festschrift Walter W. Müller zum 60. Geburtstag</i> , edited by Norbert Nebes, 21–38. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994

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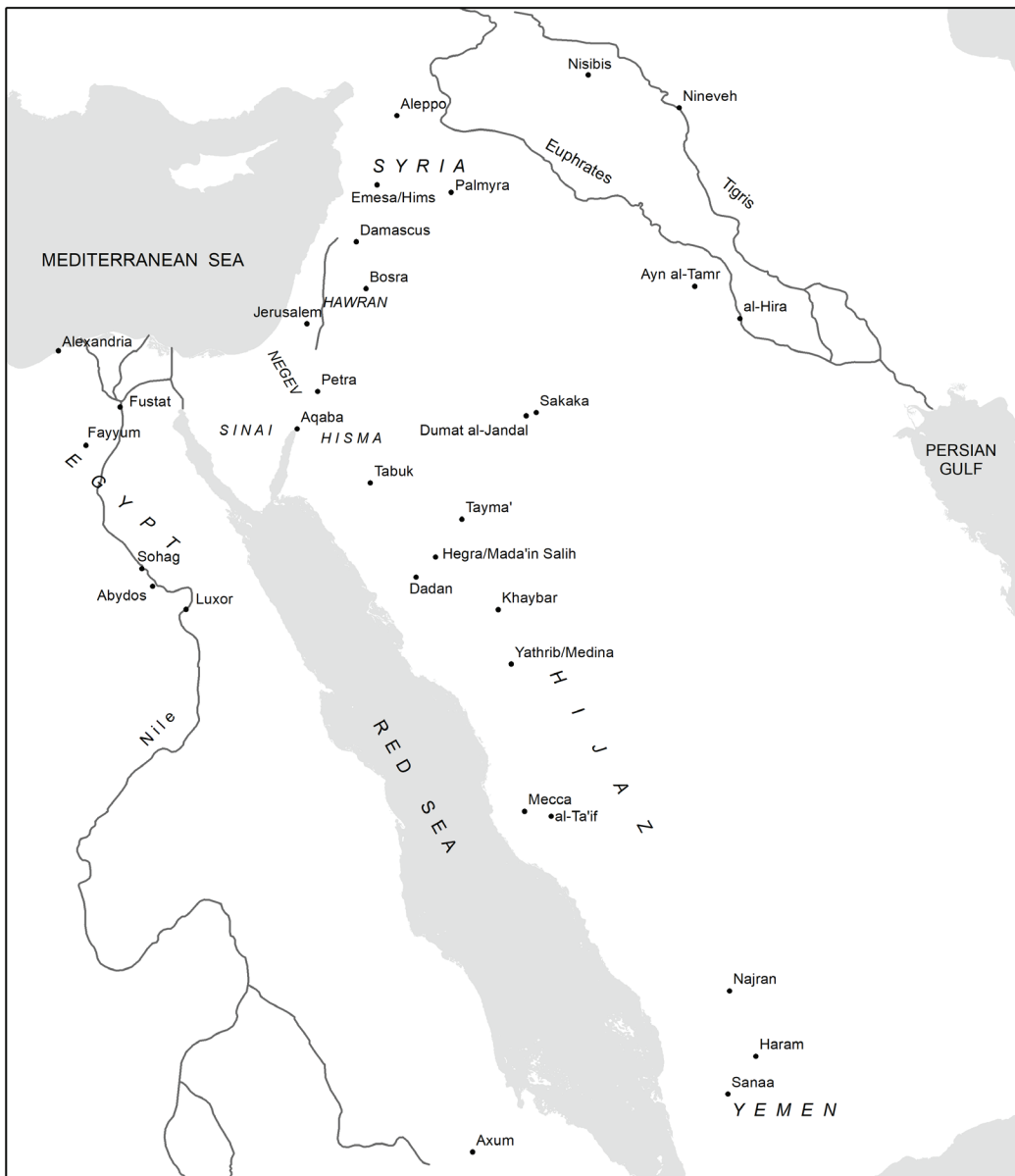
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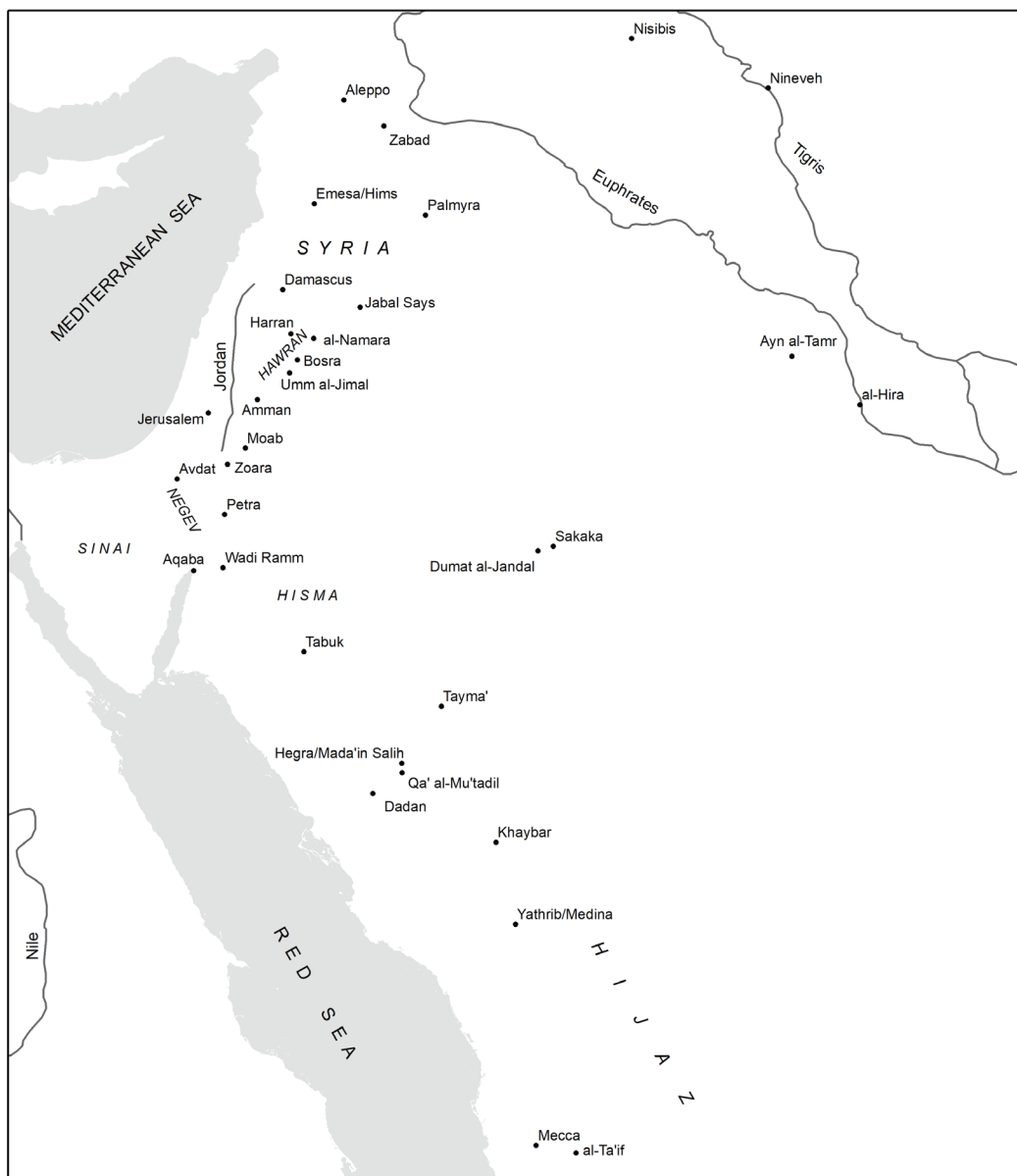
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Arabia and adjacent regions (sites mentioned in book)



North Arabia (sites mentioned in book)

Introduction

DURING THE CENTURIES LEADING UP to the emergence of Islam, various religions, both monotheistic and otherwise, were practiced in the Arabian Peninsula and adjacent regions that had contact with Arabia. The Muslim tradition itself, for example, describes various cults devoted to the worship of diverse “pagan” divinities. At the same time, it conveys many narratives about Jewish tribes living with Muḥammad’s early community and elsewhere in Arabia. For a long time, scholars have also had access to Greek texts describing some pre-Islamic Arabian religious practices and to Syriac texts relating the experiences of Christian communities in Arabia. The involvement of the kingdom of Axum and its Christian rulers in the political and religious life of the southern parts of the peninsula in the sixth century is also well known. Of major importance for the understanding of the religious landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia are, of course, also the thousands of inscriptions from South Arabia, mainly from the area of today’s Yemen, that cover a time span of almost fifteen hundred years (from about the eighth century BCE to the sixth century CE) and that reflect the transition in at least parts of the population from an earlier polytheistic religious system to some form of monotheism around the fourth century CE. How exactly this “monotheism” was practiced and realized—that is, if it was primarily a form of Judaism or Christianity or something else entirely—and whether it was truly monotheistic are complex issues that still require more detailed study. Other sources for pre-Islamic religions or cult practices in Arabia, although less informative than the ones mentioned thus far, are the thousands of graffiti and short inscriptions that have been discovered in northern Arabia and that are written in what is commonly labeled “Ancient North Arabian” or “Epigraphic North Arabian.”

Besides the various and evolving religious landscapes that can be traced, at least to a certain degree, based on the aforementioned sources, Arabia in the century or so before Islam seems also to have been an area in which writing and writing systems were developing and undergoing significant changes. The ancient tradition of writing South Arabian languages (Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, and Hadramitic, to name the major ones), used widely for almost fifteen hundred years, appears to have died out by the middle of the sixth century CE. The same is true for the various related scripts that were used to write Ancient North Arabian. At the beginning of the seventh century, however, the Arabic text of the Qur’ān, the Islamic scripture, appears to have emerged in West Arabia written in a script that developed from earlier Nabataean writing. This fact alone suggests that there may have existed more developed traditions of writing and religious thought in Arabia than was commonly believed by Western scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This traditional understanding of pre-Islamic Arabia, which was current until fairly recently, was based mainly on later Islamic reports. These later Islamic descriptions of pre-Islamic Mecca and Arabia do mention the existence of Jews and, occasionally, Christians in West Arabia on the eve of Islam; but on balance, they depict these areas and cities

as dominated by polytheistic animist religious cults. This depiction, however, presumably reflects in part the desire of later Muslim scholars to portray the teachings of the prophet Muḥammad (d. 632 CE) as bringing monotheism to Arabia for the first time by emphasizing a pagan background. But as we consider the documentary information recently discovered from Arabia itself, some of which makes the robust presence of Jews and Christians evident, this earlier view seems to be misleading. Recent research on the Qurʾān, moreover, has proposed that this text was not so much a theological response to paganism as it was the product of an engagement with currents in the Judeo-Christian tradition with which it disagreed (for example, the Christian notion that Jesus was God's son and the concept of the Trinity, or the stringency of Jewish dietary restrictions). Archaeological excavations and survey work undertaken in recent decades in and around the peninsula have brought to light new and helpful evidence, such as archaeologically identified monasteries in the Gulf region, cultic sites in Yemen and modern-day Jordan, and the aforementioned inscriptions from both northern and southern Arabia. All this evidence points to a richly varied religious life in Arabia during the sixth century and hints at burgeoning literary activity leading up to the appearance of the Qurʾān. In addition, the relatively recent discovery of numerous inscriptions and graffiti in Arabic dating to the period shortly after the appearance of the Qurʾān has stimulated renewed research into these questions of writing and religion.

A growing international community of scholars concerned with pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia is now engaged in a vigorous debate about these questions of writing and religion and how they interact with each other. We need to know more about such basic issues as the locations of the various religious communities and their relations vis-à-vis one another; the production, availability, and possible contact of sacred texts; the nature and development of theological ideas in various localities; the evolution and concomitant influence of the very languages and scripts in which religious practices and ideas were spoken, written, and transmitted; and the manner and degree to which all these Arabian phenomena were affected by factors beyond Arabia, particularly the imperial traditions of Byzantium/Rome and Persia and the powerful religious traditions of the Fertile Crescent, particularly Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism.

This volume represents the proceedings of a conference that convened at the University of Chicago on May 18–19, 2017.¹ This conference addressed the issues and questions presented above. It was attended by leading scholars of Ancient North and South Arabian, Nabataean, pre-Islamic, and Islamic Arabic dialectology and epigraphy; Qurʾānic studies; and Arabian archaeology. The goal was to generate a rich interdisciplinary discussion of these basic issues of writing and religion that provide the background to the appearance and coalescence of the Qurʾān so as to help place that enigmatic text into a firmer historical, linguistic, religious, and literary context.

The present volume contains thirteen chapters that address both philological and literary aspects. Although the stated parameters of the conference were Arabia from about 500 to 700 CE, a number of articles somewhat spill over those artificial boundaries. This broadening is most noticeable in the case of the chapter by M. C. A. Macdonald, which describes

1 Thirteen of the fourteen papers presented at the conference appear as chapters in this volume. On the fourteenth contribution, see below.

the religious concepts of northern Arabia (and adjacent parts of Syria, Sinai, etc.) on the basis of graffiti and inscriptions dating sometimes several centuries before the rise of Islam; they are important, however, because graffiti of this kind seem to die out by about 500 CE, so these earlier writings provide us with almost the only documentary clues as to what religious practice in this region may have been in the century before Islam—otherwise we would have no documentary data. Other chapters, too, sometimes deal with materials outside Arabia (but usually connected to it) or extending beyond 700 CE (especially chapters dealing with the text of the Qur'an).

An obvious lacuna in the coverage of this volume, and of the conference on which it is based, is the absence of a chapter devoted to pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. This omission was intentional, however, since we desired to rely as much as possible on documentary rather than literary sources in the discussion of the issues of language and religion in the pre-Islamic era. While Arabic poetry does contain information on these subjects, our concern was that as literary texts—and texts whose date of origin has been called into question—the poems alleged to be of pre-Islamic origin might provide misleading information that reflected mainly the views of later transmitters over the Islamic centuries rather than the linguistic and religious realities of the sixth century.

Another lacuna in the volume—but not in the conference—is a chapter devoted to questions of language and religion in South Arabia. We were fortunate to have at the conference Professor Christian Julien Robin, a most active participant whose intimate knowledge of the corpus of South Arabian inscriptions brought welcome insights at many turns. His paper is not included in this volume, however, because it was very long—almost one hundred pages in its original form—and, unlike the other contributions, was written in French rather than English. For reasons of both length and language, therefore, we proposed to him that his contribution form a separate volume in the LAMINE series. A brief summary of the contributions to the present volume follows here.

Fred M. Donner provides an introduction to the three major language groups and scripts of pre-Islamic Arabia—namely, Old South Arabian, Ancient North Arabian, and Nabataean—and their relation to Arabic. Although it is now certain that the Arabic script is derived from Nabataean writing, it is still unclear where exactly Arabic writing arose. The latter question, Donner argues, might be answered by looking at certain features in the Arabic orthography such as the seat of the *hamza* and the spelling of the definite article. He concludes that Arabic might have first been written in northwest Arabia or in the Ḥijāz.

Michael C. A. Macdonald gathers evidence for religious practices in North Arabia. In particular, he compares the evidence found in the major oases of Taymā', Dadan, and Duma—although the latter hardly yields any evidence—to that of nomadic peoples, especially those represented by the large Safaitic corpus. Interestingly, the scarce evidence seems to indicate that religious practices in settled areas such as oases differed quite drastically from those of nomadic people. In the oases of Taymā' and Dadan, worship seems to be mostly limited to one particular deity, with other deities mentioned only rarely, while the nomadic people seem to have worshipped a larger number of deities.

Laila Nehmé looks at the religious landscape of northwest Arabia as reflected in Nabataean, Nabataeo-Arabic, and pre-Islamic inscriptions from the area. These three major corpora reflect consecutive stages of writing in the period from the first century BCE to the fifth and sixth centuries CE and thus allow for the investigation of diachronic developments. In

particular, Nehmé collects and investigates the evidence from divine names and theophoric elements in these corpora and concludes that, although there are local differences, the most popular divine and theophoric names are spread throughout the Nabataean kingdom. She further outlines the major divinities attested in various areas of the northwestern Arabian Peninsula.

Ahmad Al-Jallad investigates a well-known issue in pre-Islamic inscriptions that also occurs, although rarely, in the Qurʾān, namely, the occurrence of final -w on anthroponyms, a feature that occurs frequently in pre-Islamic inscriptions. Al-Jallad suggests that this -w originally presented the marker of the nominative case but was gradually fossilized and reinterpreted as an orthographic device for triptotic names in some traditions of Arabic writing.

Robert Hoyland investigates the connotations of two prominent terms in the Qurʾān—*ʿarabī* and *aʿjamī*. *ʿArabī* is commonly described as “clear” or “clarifying,” while *aʿjamī* has negative connotations. In his article, Hoyland asks what *ʿarabī* and *aʿjamī* might reflect in terms of underlying languages. Based on the evidence from the Qurʾān and pre-Islamic inscriptions, he argues that *ʿarabī* reflects the Arabic spoken in a particular area as evidenced in said inscriptions, while *aʿjamī* seems to be linked to Aramaic or may even refer to Aramaic itself.

Gordon Newby looks at the questions of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia and scripture through the lens of Arabian Jews. He argues that Jewish influence was part of a complex tapestry that was antecedent to and contemporary with an Arabian culture and the embedded language and notions of scripture and religion reflected in the Qurʾān.

Sidney Griffith takes a new look at an old question, namely, whether there existed a written translation of the Bible into Arabic during the first third of the seventh century CE. Investigating passages from the Qurʾān, Griffith notices that although the text exhibits a high awareness of the Bible, it hardly ever quotes the Bible itself. In addition, it contains narratives and motifs that are better known from parabiblical literature. In an attempt to find the potential sources or parallels for these biblical and parabiblical narratives, Griffith compares the biblical stories in the Qurʾān with the Syriac literary type termed *mêmrê*.

Suleyman Dost looks at the language of ritual purity in the Qurʾān and compares certain idioms and terms to those found in Old South Arabian inscriptions. After investigating Qurʾānic and South Arabian terms and concepts, he concludes that there are substantial parallels between the Qurʾānic terms of ritual purity and those found in South Arabia, especially in the subcorpus of Haramic texts. The code of ritual purity found in these Haramic texts shows intriguing parallels with its Qurʾānic counterpart as well. The Haramic inscriptions thus provide important evidence for understanding the Qurʾānic injunctions.

François Déroche looks at the development of manuscripts of the Qurʾān and ties that development to the question why certain older manuscript traditions that existed during the early years of Islam were deliberately destroyed. Déroche questions the common explanation that the destruction of earlier manuscripts was motivated by an attempt to eradicate competing versions of the Qurʾān. Instead, he argues, the Qurʾān went through a longer period during which an ideal conception of the text was sought. A final representation emerged only in the tenth century, when the text itself was canonized.

Kyle Longworth investigates early Arabic tombstone inscriptions to place them into the wider context of late antique Christian and Jewish epithets. Christian and Jewish

tombstones of late antiquity often lack explicit theological doctrines, a feature that early Arabic tombstones seem to share. Only later epithets on Arabic tombstones developed an emphasis on the Qurʾān and Muḥammad.

Ilkka Lindstedt investigates the expression of religious warfare and martyrdom in Arabic graffiti from the period between 690 and 730 CE—the time of the early formation of Islam—to trace the background and emergence of these concepts. After a thorough examination of the pertinent inscriptions, Lindstedt argues that the Arabic graffiti show that early Muslims in general viewed fighting and falling in God’s path in religious terms and as religiously inspired. That the inscriptional evidence is limited to a specific period (the Marwānid), however, begs the question whether the conclusions are equally valid for earlier periods.

Adam Flowers looks at the development of the term *sūrah*. He argues that this term originally denoted smaller, independent units of prophetic revelation, which were then combined into longer chapters. Flowers bases his claim on paleographic, literary, and historiographical analysis.

Hamza Zafar investigates the relationship between the concepts of “prophet” and “anti-prophet” in the Qurʾān, with the former claiming power through prophecy and the latter through patrimony. He develops the idea of an “antipatrimonial” theme or attitude in Qurʾānic historiography, a theme that reflects the tension or rupture between prophecy and patrimony. Throughout the article, Zafar develops this concept based on the historiographic pericopes commonly referred to as “histories of cities.”

We are pleased to offer this collection of excellent essays to the public, and we trust that readers will benefit from the intellectual energy that was felt at the conference, titled “Scripts and Scriptures,” on which this volume is based.

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A NOTE ON DATES

Dates preceding the rise of Islam in the seventh century are given according to the Common era (CE), or occasionally BCE. For years following the rise of Islam, dates are usually given in both the Muslim era (AH, *Anno Hegirae*) and the Common era, with a slash separating the AH and CE dates (e.g., 132 AH/750 CE, or sometimes simply 132/750 or “second/eighth century” when the context makes matters clear).

1

Scripts and Scripture in Late Antique Arabia

An Overview¹

Fred M. Donner
University of Chicago

WHAT WAS THE BACKGROUND AGAINST which the sacred scripture of Islam, the Qurʾān, first emerged? Any attempt to answer this apparently simple question forces us to confront a range of difficult issues having to do with the diverse languages spoken where the Qurʾān arose,² the writing systems used to record them, and the precursor scriptural traditions in the region that might have served as models or affected how contemporaries received the new scripture.

THREE TRADITIONS OF WRITING

In the first half of the first millennium CE, three indigenous traditions of writing were current in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula and adjacent lands;³ the writing of Arabic, in its now-familiar cursive script, was not one of them. The first of the three forms of writing was a distinctive monumental script (fig. 1.1), known as *musnad*, that was used to write a group of related Semitic languages (lumped together for convenience under the terms Old South Arabian [OSA], Epigraphic South Arabian [ESA], or Ancient South Arabian [ASA]).⁴ These were the languages of the ancient South Arabian kingdoms of Maʿīn, Sabaʿ,

1 I am indebted to several colleagues from the “Scripts and Scripture” conference (University of Chicago, May 2017) for helpful comments and guidance on the issues touched on in this essay, particularly colleagues Ahmad Al-Jallad, Michael Macdonald, and Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee.

2 Generally assumed to be Arabia, but some scholars—notably Wansbrough, in his *Qurʾanic Studies*—have proposed that the Qurʾān was actually the product of southern Iraq or Syria.

3 It should be noted that the three writing traditions are presented here in a highly simplified way; each one of them displayed significant regional variations both in the actual glyphs they used and in the languages they sought to render. There are also to be found in Arabia occasional graffiti and inscriptions in languages such as Greek, Latin, and Hebrew left by travelers or others who were not native to Arabia. An increasingly complete and valuable online database of Arabian inscriptions of all kinds is the Digital Archive for the Study of Pre-Islamic Arabian Inscriptions (DASI), accessible at <http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/>.

4 On these languages, see Hasselbach-Andee, “Old South Arabian,” and Nebes and Stein, “Ancient South Arabian”; also Stein, “Palaeography of the Ancient South Arabian Script.” The online database Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions (CSAI), which aims to include images, transcriptions, and translations of all known South Arabian inscriptions, is being compiled at the University of Pisa as part of the broader DASI project (see n. 3 above).



Figure 1.1. Sabaic inscription (YM 14329, Yemen Museum). The inscription begins in the upper right and proceeds *boustrophedon*:
 ‘mkrb bn r’s¹hmw d^sqr mwdd smh¹ly wyt¹mr hqny ’lmqh kl wldhw
 b’ttr wb ’lmqh wb dt hmyym wb s¹mhwlly wb yt¹mr. Translation:
 “mkrb (PN), son of r’s¹hmw (PN) of d-s²qr (probably tribal name), friend of s¹mh¹ly (ruler) and yt¹mr (ruler) dedicated to ’lmqh (deity) all his sons. By ’ttr (deity) and by ’lmqh and by dt-h.mym (female deity) and by s¹mh¹ly and by yt¹mr.”
 (I am grateful to R. Hasselbach-Andee for the translation.)

Qatabān, Ḥaḍramawt, and later Ḥimyar that dominated southwest Arabia and adjacent regions from late in the second millennium BCE until about the time of the rise of Islam; and the *musnad* writing system had been in use since the eighth century BCE for formal inscriptions such as temple dedications and commemorative markers on dams and other constructions. The home region of this writing tradition was Yemen and adjacent districts, but a few inscriptions have been found much farther afield, such as one in Minaean on the Greek island of Delos that, presumably, was left by a South Arabian merchant. Beginning in the 1970s, inscribed palm-sticks have also been discovered—palm-sticks that represent another, more cursive way of writing these languages (known as *zabūr*) for use in more ephemeral communications such as letters.

The second epigraphic tradition of late antique Arabia was found in northern Arabia and southern geographical Syria and was employed to write a variety of dialects of North Arabian languages. These are sometimes called Old Arabic (OA) and Ancient North Arabian (ANA), but the designation really refers to the scripts used and does not necessarily indicate close linguistic affinity.⁵ Several sets of letter-forms—often related, but not identical to one another—have been identified and sometimes linked to a particular region or town, including the scripts called Safaitic, Dadanitic (Lihyanic), Hismaic, Taymanatic, and Thamudic. These glyphs were used to inscribe tens of thousands of graffiti, or much more rarely monumental inscriptions, on stones and rock walls from central Syria down to the northern Ḥijāz (as well as a few examples from eastern Arabia; fig. 1.2). The languages or dialects rendered by these alphabets belong to the Semitic family, and it has been suggested that some of them may be the linguistic precursors of what eventually crystallizes as Arabic, despite the many variations in linguistic features among them. Al-Jallad, for example, argues that the “Safaitic” inscriptions reflect an early form of Arabic on the basis of a substantial number of isoglosses,⁶ but this view remains conjectural. A noteworthy feature of both the South Arabian and the ancient North Arabian alphabets is that they contained a number of glyphs (usually twenty-eight or twenty-nine) sufficient to have a distinct symbol for each consonant used in the Semitic dialect they rendered into writing. A further characteristic is that neither of these systems wrote vowels, either long or short, in any way. So, in these writing systems, words that were pronounced *kitāb*, *kātib*, *kataba*, and *kutub*, for example, would all be written simply as *k-t-b*.

The third inscriptional tradition of late antique Arabia was that of Nabataean, used to write the Nabataean dialect of Aramaic, itself a descendant of Imperial Aramaic (fig. 1.3).⁷ Centered on the Nabataean capital, Petra, Nabataean was written in southern Syria (the Ḥawrān region, etc.), Sinai, and northeastern Arabia as far south as Madā’in Šaliḥ in the Ḥijāz; and a few Nabataean inscriptions have recently been found in north-central Arabia

5 The linguistic situation in northern Arabia in this period, as well as the use of scripts there, was highly complex. In “Ancient North Arabian,” Macdonald gives a good overview of North Arabian linguistics. See also his “Reflections on the Linguistic Map of Pre-Islamic Arabia” and Al-Jallad’s “What Is Ancient North Arabian?” The North Arabian inscriptions are being compiled in the Online Corpus of Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia (OCIANA), also part of the DASI archive (see n. 3 above).

6 Especially Al-Jallad, “What Is Ancient North Arabian?”

7 See Macdonald, “Languages, Scripts, and the Use of Writing.” The Nabataean inscriptions are also being collected in the DASI archive; see n. 3 above.

around Sakāka and Dūmat al-Jandal (modern al-Jawf).

In comparison with the South Arabian and Ancient North Arabian writing systems, which had almost thirty glyphs, Nabataean contained only twenty-two distinct glyphs, a number sufficient to render the consonants found in the Nabataean dialect of Aramaic. It also differed from the other writing systems in using the letters *w* and *y* both to indicate those consonants and as *matres lectionis* to render the long vowels *ū* and *ī*, respectively.

These three traditions of writing all had a robust presence and left behind tens of thousands of graffiti and monumental inscriptions in southern Arabia, the Ḥijāz and northern Arabia, and southern geographical Syria over a period of fifteen hundred years. Yet two of these Arabian traditions of writing inexplicably died out in, or before, the sixth century CE. The South Arabian inscriptions became increasingly few during the fourth and fifth centuries CE, and the monumental Epigraphic South Arabian inscriptions died out completely in the sixth century; the last dated inscription in Epigraphic South Arabian is from about 554 CE. It is usually claimed that graffiti and other writings in the Ancient North Arabian scripts also died in the fifth century CE, if they had not already done so by the fourth century, because none of them makes any mention of Christianity, which would be expected if they were inscribed in the fifth century or later. The absence of references to Christianity is suggestive, but as most such inscriptions are short graffiti that include only names, which might not reveal the writer's religion, this *argumentum ex silentio* should perhaps not be considered decisive. On the other hand, there is no positive evidence for the survival into the seventh century CE of graffiti in any of the Old North Arabian scripts. So the demise of this system of writing by the time of the rise of Islam, if not long before, seems fairly certain.

On the other hand, the writing of Nabataean—the third written tradition of pre-Islamic Arabia—underwent a more complex and more interesting evolution in the centuries before the rise of Islam, that is, between the third and seventh centuries CE. It was proposed long ago, by pioneers in comparative Semitics such as Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930), Julius Euting (1839–1913), and Mark Lidzbarski (1868–1928), that the Nabataean alphabet was the ancestor of the letter-forms of the Arabic script. This assertion was based in part on the observation that the cursive script of Arabic, like the Nabataean alphabet, contains fewer letter-forms than the Arabic language's twenty-eight consonants, thus requiring some letters to represent two or more consonants in Arabic and eventually distinguishing them through a system of diacritical dots—to distinguish the sound of *ʿayn* from that of

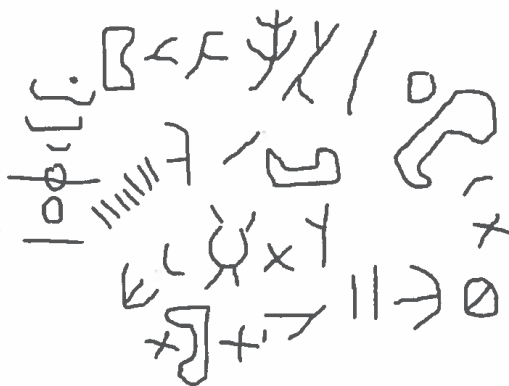


Figure 1.2. A pre-Islamic North Arabian inscription (Hismaic/Safaitic mixed script). The inscription begins vertically on the left side: *l 'qrb bn ms'k d 'l 'mrt w hll s'nt mt hrtt h-mlk*. Translation: "By 'qrb son of Ms'k of the people of 'mrt and he camped the year Ḥāretat the king died." (Reproduced from Al-Salameen, "A New Ancient North Arabian Inscription.")

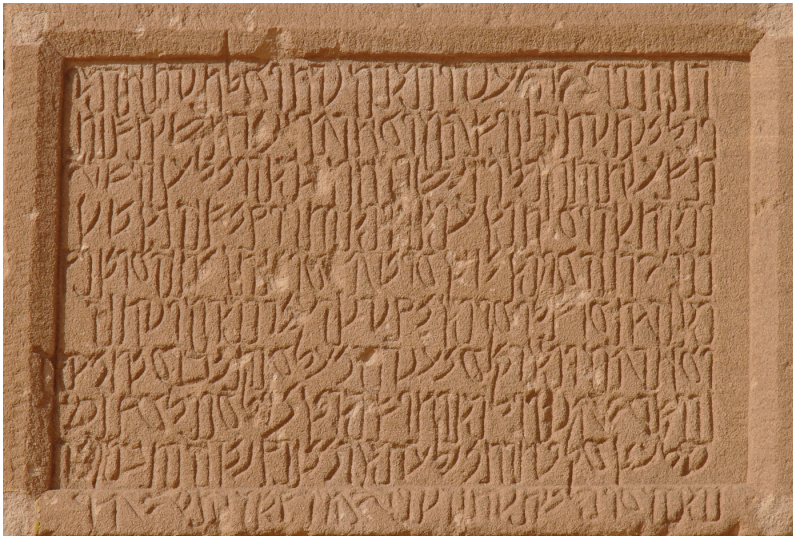


Figure 1.3. Nabataean inscription H 16 from Madā'in Šāliḥ. A dedication of a tomb built by two aristocratic women of Madā'in Šāliḥ, it is dated 1 BCE/CE. The first two-and-one-half lines read: *dnh kpr' dy 'bdw kmkm brt w'lt brt ḥrmw / wklybt brth lnpšhm s'ḥrhm byrh ṭbt šnt /tš' lḥrtt mlk nbṭw rḥm 'amh*. Translation: "This is the tomb which Kamkam daughter of Wa'ilat daughter of Haramu and Kulaybat, her daughter, made for themselves and their descendants. In the month of Tebet, the ninth year of Haretat, King of the Nabataeans, lover of his people." (First published in Healey, *The Nabataean Tomb Inscriptions of Mada'in Salih*, 154–62. Photograph by, and courtesy of, M. C. A. Macdonald.)

ghayn, for example. (In contrast, as we have noted above, both the South Arabian and the pre-Islamic North Arabian scripts contained separate letter-forms for all twenty-eight Arabic consonants.⁸) The decision to write Arabic in an alphabet that, because of its more limited repertoire of letter-forms, was in this respect inadequate to render the sounds of Arabic presumably reflects the status of Nabataean and its writing system as the political and cultural prestige language of northern Arabia in the early centuries CE.

About sixty years ago the Semitist Jean Starcky (1909–1968) challenged the idea that the Arabic script derived from Nabataean. Starcky, observing that both the Arabic and Syriac scripts feature a prominent baseline, argued for a Syriac origin for the Arabic script, and he speculated that it may have arisen as a chancery script at the court of the Naṣrid dynasty of al-Ḥīra in Iraq.⁹ While a few scholars backed Starcky's views,¹⁰ many criticized his theory, and most of his arguments were effectively refuted by Adolf Grohmann, but

8 Actually, the South Arabian alphabet contained even more letters, as at least one of the phonemes found in South Arabian (a sibilant referred to by Semitists as *s*³) is not found among the repertoire of twenty-eight consonants in Arabic.

9 Starcky, "Pétra et la Nabatène," cols. 932–34: "L'écriture arabe . . . dérive tout entière du syriaque tel qu'il était écrit dans la capitale lahmide."

10 Notably Troupeau, "Écriture et phonétique arabes," bringing phonological support.

it has continued to attract some adherents.¹¹ Recently, it has also been proposed that the Arabic script derived directly from a cursive form of the South Arabian script,¹² but in view of the limited numbers of letter-forms in Arabic, this derivation seems unlikely. For as noted above, the South Arabian alphabets had distinct signs for all the Arabic consonants, so there would have been no reason to drop some letter-forms and then be forced to make other letters do double duty. Moreover, the letter-forms of Arabic script do not resemble those of the South Arabian alphabet.

Especially through the work of Michael Macdonald and Laila Nehmé, this debate over the origin of the Arabic script has been definitively settled in the last few years by the discovery of more late Nabataean inscriptions written in cursive form (rather than as separate letters in the alphabet). These cursive Nabataean inscriptions demonstrate convincingly that the latest Nabataean letter-forms, found in graffiti from the third to fifth centuries, occupy a transitional position between “classical” Nabataean letter-forms and letter-forms of the Arabic script;¹³ Nehmé has proposed that this kind of writing should be called “Nabataeo-Arabic” to signal clearly its transitional quality.¹⁴ The last dated Nabataean inscription so far discovered is from 455–456 CE; but from the period of the transition, we find some inscriptions that mix classical and cursive Nabataean letter-forms with Arabic letter-forms (which are, of course, cursive); the language of some of these inscriptions is Nabataean Aramaic language, but others are written in a form of Arabic language, and some contain a mixture of words from both languages.¹⁵ So in one sense the Nabataean tradition of writing never died out but instead evolved gradually into the writing of Arabic script. But this evolution went hand-in-hand with the gradual replacement of Aramaic language by Arabic language in the inscriptions. Thus, in the linguistic sense, Nabataean did die out.

The transition from Nabataean to Arabic writing was not a smooth one, however. Some areas, such as the Ḥawrān, seem to have clung to classical Nabataean letter-forms for a longer period of time than other areas, such as northwest Arabia and the Ḥijāz, which adopted more quickly the “transitional” forms that were trending toward Arabic script; moreover, to judge from dated Nabataean inscriptions, the classical and transitional forms seem to have coexisted in some areas for quite a long time. Macdonald has argued cogently that this phenomenon may be attributable to the existence of different “registers” of inscriptions: formal inscriptions used the classical letter-forms, while informal graffiti tended to favor the transitional forms. But even the graffiti sometimes imitated formal letter-forms, and in such cases we may find both forms in a single inscription. The relationship between late Nabataean and early Arabic script thus implies strongly that the Arabic script, which is of course also a cursive form of writing, must have emerged somewhere

11 The debate over Nabataean or Syriac origins is concisely summarized in Gruendler, *Development of the Arabic Scripts*, pp. 1–3. Recently, an effort has been made to rekindle the Syriac-origin thesis; see Noja Nosedá, “From Syriac to Pahlavi,” pp. 266–92. This effort seems, however, to be motivated less by new evidence than by the desire of the “Inārah” group to find the origins of Islam in Syriac Christianity.

12 See Abulhab, “Roots of the Arabic Script.”

13 See in particular Macdonald, “ARNA Nab 17”; Nehmé, “A Glimpse”; and Nehmé, “Aramaic or Arabic?”

14 Nehmé, “Aramaic or Arabic?” pp. 75–76.

15 Numerous examples in Nehmé, “A Glimpse.”

in the zone where Nabataean was written and that it may have been written on perishable materials for a considerable time before the first extant Arabic inscriptions.

MAPPING THE RISE OF ARABIC

Even if, as we have seen, the letter-forms of Arabic script can now be confidently traced back to late Nabataean cursive, it is still far from clear exactly where the writing of Arabic as we know it first arose.¹⁶ It seems reasonable to assume that the people who first tried to write the language we now know as Arabic with these letters would have attempted to capture in their writing the sounds of the particular dialect of Arabic they actually spoke, since there was as yet no tradition of writing Arabic in any other way that might have induced them to do otherwise. In this connection it is noteworthy that Arabic writing displays some distinctive features that find no parallel in earlier Nabataean writing, particularly in orthography—the way Arabic employs its letters to write particular words. We can surmise that these distinctive orthographic features reflect the dialect of Arabic actually spoken where this system of writing first coalesced; so if we can identify where these particular dialectic features were used in the centuries before the rise of Islam, we might be able to locate where the Arabic script first developed.

A decisive first step in such an approach was pioneered more than a century ago by the German Arabist Karl Vollers. In 1906 Vollers published *Volkssprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien*, a brilliant work in which he argued convincingly that certain aspects of the orthography of the Qurʾān text suggest that the Qurʾān was originally written in the spoken vernacular of Mecca.¹⁷ The Hījāzī dialect, according to the later Arabic philologists of the Islamic period, did not utilize the glottal stop (ʾ) in the middle of words but, rather, elided this sound—what speakers of Cockney English would call the “glo”al stop—into the adjacent short vowels to form a long vowel.¹⁸ So, for example, the Classical Arabic word *muʾmin* (“believer”) would have been pronounced *mūmin* in this dialect, with the medial glottal stop assimilated into the preceding short *u* vowel to form a long *ū* sound, and it was written in this way in the Qurʾān, with the opening letter *mīm* followed by a *wāw* as *mater lectionis* for the long vowel *ū* (i.e., as *m.w.m.n*).¹⁹

16 It should be noted that Classical Arabic is a literary idiom that was never anyone’s mother tongue and that it emerged only in the eighth and ninth centuries CE. The relation of the Arabic of the Qurʾān to Classical Arabic and to the diverse regional dialects is complex and cannot be treated here; a concise overview is found in Rabin, “Beginnings of Classical Arabic.”

17 This work of Vollers was brilliant but much reviled by many colleagues of his day—so much so that Vollers left the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft in a huff in 1906. The objections by Nöldeke and others did not revolve around his observations on the *hamza*, however, but instead on his insistence that the Qurʾān was not recited with *iʾrāb* or case endings. Paul Kahle’s “Arabic Readers of the Koran” rehabilitated Vollers’s views with convincing evidence in support. See also the discussion in Rabin, “Beginnings of Classical Arabic.”

18 The philologists’ data on the glottal stop in Hījāzī dialect is surveyed in Rabin, *Ancient West-Arabian*, pp. 130–45.

19 van Putten, “Hamzah,” examines this question anew and concludes not only that the Qurʾānic text was written in an orthography that reflected the absence of medial glottal stops but also that the oral text itself generally lacked the glottal stop in the middle of words.

Building on the basic cogency of Vollers's observation, we can suggest that it also applies to the first writing of Arabic more generally, not to the text of the Qur'ān only, because it seems fair to assume that the Qur'ān represents but one example of the way Arabic had first come to be written. The Qur'ān's orthography, in short, reflects a more general scribal practice that had arisen somewhere in the Nabataean cultural zone and reflected one of the dialects of Arabic spoken there. If, after all, the Arabic script had first been created to transcribe an idiom that did observe medial glottal stops, it is fair to assume that the consonantal orthography of words having them would simply mark them with the *alif*, which was originally the marker for the glottal stop, in Arabic script as in other Semitic alphabets. This practice, for example, is what we find in the famous inscription Jaussen-Savignac 17 from Madā'in Šālīḥ, dated to 267 CE, which renders a North Arabian (Arabic?) text in the Nabataean script; the word for "hundred" in line 5 of this inscription is written as *m.ʿh* (presumably pronounced *mi'ah*), not as *m.y.h* (pronounced *mīyah*—as also in many modern Arabic dialects) as one might expect if the glottal stop were palatalized.²⁰

Vollers argued that the Arabic text of the Qur'ān—the Qur'ānic Consonantal Text (QCT, or *rasm* in Arabic)—was fitted out only at a later stage in its transmission with markings to show when medial glottal stops should be pronounced even though the QCT did not indicate the glottal stop. This marking is the *hamza* sign (a miniature 'ayn, to indicate a laryngeal break in the air flow), familiar to and beloved by anyone who has studied even one year of Arabic because of its apparently capricious need to have another letter (*alif*, *wāw*, or *yā'*) to serve as its *kursī*, or "chair," on which to sit—or, sometimes, no chair at all. The *kursī* is of course the Qur'ānic long vowel that stood in the QCT where the missing glottal stop was assimilated into its surrounding short vowels, and the chair could thus change if the vowels around the glottal stop shifted. This refinement of Qur'ānic—and Arabic—orthography by indicating the *hamza* was added in the eighth and ninth centuries, when "proper" Classical Arabic was being codified as a literary idiom under the influence of eastern Arabian dialects, which did pronounce medial glottal stops.²¹

We can propose that other features of Arabic orthography besides the rendering of the glottal stop may also provide clues to the script's origins. One such feature is the script's way of rendering the feminine ending of nouns, with the letter known in Classical Arabic grammar as *tā' marbūṭa* ("tied t").²² In early inscriptions and texts, including in the Qur'ān, we find a curious oscillation in how such words with a feminine ending are written—sometimes ending with the letter *hay*, sometimes with an open *tā'*. This oscillation is not difficult to explain linguistically; it reflects the pronunciation of the phrase where the word occurs in spoken language and suggests that in the dialect the Arabic script was first developed to transcribe, feminine words not in construct were pronounced with a final *-ah*, rendered naturally enough by the letter *hay*—for example, the word *ni'mah* ("grace"). But evidently the suppressed *t* sound of the feminine ending was in this dialect retained when

20 Healey and Smith, "Jaussen-Savignac 17"; cf. the rereading in Nehmé, "A Glimpse," pp. 68–69. Of course, we do not know what dialect JS 17 is attempting to transcribe—a dialect spoken in the vicinity of Madā'in Šālīḥ, where it was written, or a dialect spoken by the engraver, who may have come from some other region ruled by the Nabataeans, such as around Petra or in the Sinai.

21 As Rabin (*Ancient West-Arabian*, p. 130) puts it, "much of the complication [of Arabic orthography—FMD] . . . derives from the superposition of Eastern pronunciation upon a Western spelling."

22 Discussed in Nehmé, "Aramaic or Arabic?" pp. 84ff.