

CHAPTER 7

THE LINGUISTIC
LANDSCAPE OF
PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

Context for the Qur'an

AHMAD AL-JALLAD

THE twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented interest in the use of primary source materials in the quest for the origins of Islam and its primary text, the Qur'an. Indeed, two recent edited volumes on the subject contain the word 'context' in their titles.¹ While scholars have made great strides in balancing the later Islamic traditions with the ever-sharpening picture of a multicultural Late Antique Near East, the literary works and materials of the Arabic grammarians from the eighth and ninth centuries continue to be the primary source for the Arabic of the pre-Islamic period and its linguistic context.² The growing corpus of epigraphic evidence from all parts of the Peninsula, however, suggests that these writers were largely unaware of Arabia's linguistic diversity and cosmopolitanism in the centuries preceding the rise of Islam. This chapter will outline the linguistic map of pre-Islamic Arabia and discuss issues such as the development of the Arabic script, literacy, and multilingualism in this context. I conclude with a discussion on the stylistic parallels to the Qur'an found in the inscriptions.

¹ These are *Qur'an in Context*, edited by Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx (2010) and *The Qur'an in its Historical Context*, edited by G. S. Reynolds (2008).

² For example, see Al-Sharkawi's contribution 'Pre-Islamic Arabic' to the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*.

THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF ARABIA

The Arabian Alphabets

Arabia was home to an indigenous alphabetic tradition which scholars have conventionally labelled the ‘South Semitic’ script. The common ancestor of the South Semitic scripts descended from the original Proto-Sinaitic alphabet sometime in the second millennium BCE and is therefore a sister script of the West Semitic alphabet, from which the Phoenician script and ultimately the Latin script derive. While the West Semitic script, as applied to languages like Old Aramaic and Hebrew, contained several polyphonic glyphs, the South Semitic alphabets represented each phoneme with a single glyph. The earliest example of the South Semitic script is the Ancient South Arabian alphabet, which contains twenty-nine glyphs all signifying consonants.

Macdonald (2000) established two main divisions in the South Semitic script family: Ancient South Arabian (Figure 7.1), which expressed the four principal languages of Ancient Yemen—Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, and Ḥ adramitic—and Ancient North Arabian (ANA), which covers all of the remaining South Semitic scripts of Arabia and the southern Levant. The ASA script is known in two basic varieties—the monumental script, used for texts carved on hard surfaces such as rock or bronze, and the minuscule hand, employed to carve texts on perishable materials such as palm-bark and sticks. The latter was used primarily for the composition of day-to-day documents. The inscriptional record of ASA spans more than 1,500 years, from the tenth century BCE to the rise of Islam, and possibly as late as the ninth century CE (Drewes et al. 2013).

	ESab	MSab	LSab	ESab	MSab	LSab
h	𐩦 𐩧	𐩨 𐩩	𐩪 𐩫	𐩬 𐩭	𐩮 𐩯	𐩰 𐩱
l	𐩲 𐩳	𐩴 𐩵	𐩶 𐩷	𐩸 𐩹	𐩺 𐩻	𐩼 𐩽
h	𐩿 𐻀	𐻁 𐻂	𐻃 𐻄	𐻆 𐻇	𐻈 𐻉	𐻊 𐻋
m	𐻌 𐻍	𐻎 𐻏	𐻐 𐻑	𐻒 𐻓	𐻔 𐻕	𐻖 𐻗
q	𐻘 𐻙	𐻚 𐻛	𐻜 𐻝	𐻞 𐻟	𐻠 𐻡	𐻢 𐻣
w	𐻤 𐻥	𐻦 𐻧	𐻨 𐻩	𐻫 𐻬	𐻭 𐻮	𐻯 𐻰
s	𐻲 𐻳	𐻴 𐻵	𐻶 𐻷	𐻸 𐻹	𐻺 𐻻	𐻼 𐻽
r	𐻿 𐼀	𐼁 𐼂	𐼃 𐼄	𐼆 𐼇	𐼈 𐼉	𐼊 𐼋
b	𐼍 𐼎	𐼏 𐼐	𐼑 𐼒	𐼓 𐼔	𐼕 𐼖	𐼗 𐼘
t	𐼜 𐼝	𐼞 𐼟	𐼠 𐼡	𐼢 𐼣	𐼤 𐼥	𐼦 𐼧
s	𐼨 𐼩	𐼪 𐼫	𐼬 𐼭	𐼮 𐼯	𐼰 𐼱	𐼲 𐼳
k	𐼵 𐼶	𐼷 𐼸	𐼹 𐼺	𐼻 𐼼	𐼽 𐼾	𐼿 𐽀
n	𐽁 𐽂	𐽃 𐽄	𐽅 𐽆	𐽇 𐽈	𐽉 𐽊	𐽋 𐽌
h	𐽍 𐽎	𐽏 𐽐	𐽑 𐽒	𐽓 𐽔	𐽕 𐽖	𐽗 𐽘
s	𐽚 𐽛	𐽜 𐽝	𐽞 𐽟	𐽠 𐽡	𐽢 𐽣	𐽤 𐽥

FIGURE 7.1 ASA script chart. Fig. 63.1 on p. 1045 in P. Stein, ‘Ancient South Arabian’, in: S. Weninger et al. (Eds.) *The Semitic Languages: An International Handbook*, Berlin/Boston 2011 (Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft 36), pp. 1042–73. © Peter Stein. Used by permission.

Unlike the ASA script, ANA does not constitute a unity in any sense, but reflects several distinct scripts which express a myriad of languages and dialects, the interrelationships of which remain to be worked out. ANA comprises four established script categories, Safaitic, Himaic, Taymanitic, and Dadanitic, and one pending category into which all of the unclassified inscriptions are placed, Thamudic (no relation to the ancient tribe of Thamud). It is impossible to date when the production of the ANA inscriptions began or ended. The earliest datable texts are in the Taymanitic and Thamudic B scripts, produced in the early to mid-first millennium BCE based on their contents, while the latest dated text is part of a polyglot inscription from Ḥeḡrā dated to 267 CE (JSNab 17; this text is dealt with in detail in the section on ‘Multilingualism’). Many scholars have assumed that the inscriptions cease in the fourth century CE based on the absence of references to Christianity—which is thought to have spread among the nomads in the fourth century CE—or events from the Byzantine period. While this reason is most certainly unsatisfactory, it would, moreover, only apply to the Safaitic inscriptions, since they constitute the only corpus in which occasional references to events beyond the desert can be found. The production of texts in the Taymanitic and Dadanitic scripts seems to have ended much earlier. There is no way to chronologically delimit most of the Thamudic inscriptions based on their contents, since they consist primarily of personal names and short prayers.

The Languages of Pre-Islamic Arabia

South Arabia

The languages expressed by these scripts are equally diverse. The four attested ASA languages are not considered varieties of early Arabic, but rather constitute an independent branch of Central Semitic, also called Ancient South Arabian. Some of the common grammatical features include a post-positive definite article *-(h)n* and *m*-endings (mimation) on singular and broken plural nouns which are not in the construct state, analogous to nunation (*tanwīn*) in Arabic. It is unclear when these languages were replaced by Arabic, but they may have continued to be spoken as late as the ninth century CE. Arabic writers from that period noted the existence of non-Arabic languages in Yemen which they called Himyaritic. While the examples of Himyaritic these writers recorded share some features in common with the languages of the inscriptions, the hallmark isoglosses of ASA—such as post-positive definite marking and mimation—are absent. This phenomenon has been the subject of multiple interpretations (see Stein 2008 and Robin 2001).

The Languages of Central and North Arabia: Old Arabic and Ancient North Arabian

Among epigraphists, the term Old Arabic is used to refer to the corpus of material composed in the Arabic language in the pre-Islamic period, and excludes texts attributed to the pre-Islamic period from later times, such as the Jāhili poetry. This strict definition is

meant to exclude oral texts which could have been edited during the process of transmission. Nevertheless, most scholars assumed that the linguistic character of the Arabic of the latter sources reached far into the pre-Islamic past. The failure then to encounter the Classical language in the inscriptional record gave rise to the belief that ‘Arabic’ was either rarely or never written prior to the sixth century CE. The focus on the differences between the forms of Arabic known from the Islamic period and the languages of the pre-Islamic epigraphy of North Arabia and Syria led to the formulation of two mutually exclusive branches: Arabic, as defined by the Qur’an, poetry, the Arabic Grammarians, etc., and Ancient North Arabian, the epigraphic varieties written in the ANA alphabets. This division was largely justified by the shape of the definite article, *h(n)* in the ANA epigraphy and *ʔ(l)* in the Arabic of the Islamic age (Beeston 1981). However, a closer examination of the evidence proves that such a classification is not maintainable. Variation between *ʔl* and *h(n)* articles is found throughout the ANA corpus, and Hismaic lacks a definite article all together. From a linguistic point of view, the entire focus on the definite article as a diagnostic feature is misguided. Semiticists have recognized that it is a late feature which spread among the Central Semitic languages through contact or as the result of parallel development (Huehnergard and Rubin 2011: 269–70), and therefore is an unsuitable feature for linguistic diagnosis, especially its phonological shape (Al-Jallad 2018: 11–16).

If we shift our focus away from differences between the Arabic of the Islamic age and the ANA inscriptional material towards shared developments in grammar, another picture emerges. Many of the grammatical innovations which are unique to Arabic are widely attested in the Safaitic corpus, such as *t*-demonstratives (Safaitic: *t h-snt* ‘this year’), negation with the particle *mā* and *lam* (Safaitic: *m hn* ‘he was not pleased’ and *lm y^cd* ‘he did not return’), the *maf^cūl* passive (Safaitic: *mqt* ‘killed’), a subjunctive in *-a* and its syntax (Safaitic: *f nḥyy* ‘so that we may live’), in addition to the occasional use of the *ʔ(l)* article (for a full list of features, see Al-Jallad 2015; 2019). The Hismaic inscriptions also share important grammatical developments with Arabic, although their brevity masks the extent of these similarities. The language of two of the longest texts composed in this script is clearly a form of Arabic (see Graf and Zwettler 2004). These facts argue against the existence of a separate Ancient North Arabian language. Instead, Old Arabic should be viewed as a continuum of dialects stretching from southern Syria into Jordan, the Negev, Sinai, and the northern Higāz, encompassing the dialects composed in the Safaitic, Hismaic, occasionally in the Nabataean, and finally in the early Arabic scripts (Al-Jallad 2018). This material is complemented by copious transcriptions in Greek from the second century CE onwards, which provide an unequalled view of Old Arabic vocalism (see Al-Jallad 2017 for a comprehensive treatment of this material).

The Non-Arabic Languages Inscribed in Ancient North Arabian Alphabets

As we move deeper into the Arabian Peninsula, the inscriptions become more enigmatic, and their linguistic character more remote from Arabic. The two major oases of North

Arabia, Taymā³ and Dadān, are each home to a unique script and language. Both of these corpora were produced in the mid-first millennium BCE, but it is impossible to know when the first or last inscriptions were carved.

Taymanitic is in some ways closer to Hebrew and Aramaic than the languages of the other ANA corpora. Most of these texts are short graffiti containing prayers to the oasis' primary deity, *Šlm*, or the recordings of participation in the wars of the oasis against its rivals. As such, only a very incomplete picture of its grammar can be formed. Among its characteristic features are the sound change of *w* > *y* in word initial position, e.g. *yrḥ* 'month' and *yd^c* 'he knew', the assimilation of *n* and *l* in unstressed position, e.g. *b* for *bin 'son of' and *šm* for *šlm* in personal names, and the merger of *s³* and *t*, as opposed to the merger of *s³* and *s¹* in Arabic, the merger of *z* and *d*, and the merger of *z* and *š* (Kootstra 2016).

Dadanitic is the only ANA script attested in both monumental inscriptions and graffiti. The largest corpus of texts records the performance of a ritual called *zll*—the nature and purpose of which remain unclear—for the patron deity of Dadān, *dhu ghabt*. The Dadanitic inscriptions exhibit considerable internal diversity, exemplified by the verb 'to perform the *zll* ritual' which is found in four forms, all in identical contexts: *ʔzll*, *hzll*, *ʔzl*, and *hzl* (Sima 1999: 93). Both definite articles *h(n)* and *ʔl* are attested (Al-Jallad 2018: 23–4). A few other features attested in this corpus suggest that the dialects of this oasis were closely related to, but not forms of, Arabic (see Al-Jallad 2018: §4).

The town of Qaryat al-Fāw has yielded a so far unique text which nearly all authors have considered an example of Old Arabic—the Rbbl bn Hf 'm epitaph (see Beeston 1979; Macdonald 2000:50). Recently, however, I have subjected the text to a close linguistic examination and concluded that it is probably a transitional dialect between some North Arabian variety and ASA (Al-Jallad 2014; Al-Jallad 2018: §7).

THE graffiti carved by the nomads of North and Central Arabia, the so-called Thamudic inscriptions, are rather brief, but they are clearly distinct from languages of the oasis towns. Most inscriptions are short and enigmatic, and even the most basic introductory formulae elude interpretation. Nevertheless, some of these texts lend themselves to straightforward interpretations, such as SESP.U 31 *h rḏw hb l- yd -n nt{n} m ḥtb* 'O Rḏw (name of a deity), grant into our hands as a gift that which was requested', while others continue to defy satisfactory decipherment, e.g. Esk 204: *wdd f sf s-ors continu/wdd*. Currently, it is impossible to say how many languages are covered by the rubric THAMUDIC and no internal chronology is possible. The challenge they pose to decipherment alone demonstrates that Arabic was not the language of all the Arabian nomads in the earliest periods.

Unlike the western two-thirds of the Peninsula, the inhabitants of the eastern third, along the Persian Gulf, seem only occasionally to have employed writing, and no indigenous scripts from this area have been discovered. Several scattered texts in Cuneiform, Greek, and Aramaic, however, have been found. The ASA script was also used to inscribe the texts on a corpus of tombstones from the region of al-Ḥaṣā in north-eastern Saudi Arabia to the Oman Peninsula. These are highly formulaic so it is difficult to say much about their grammar, but their non-Arabic character is clear. Sima has identified the

presence of a post-positive definite article⁻³, as in Aramaic, a feature unknown in the Arabian languages of the western part of the Peninsula (2002: 193–4; Stien 2017)

WRITING AND LITERACY

The abundance of written records in Arabia suggests that writing was widespread among both settled people and nomads (Figure 7.2); however, its function among both groups was quite different. Macdonald (2009: vol. 1; 2010) established an important distinction between literate societies and non-literate societies based on the role of writing for the functioning of society. Ancient South Arabia exemplifies a literate society. Its officials set up thousands of public inscriptions, recording their deeds, dedications to deities, legal decrees, and so on. The existence of public inscriptions, however, cannot stand as witness to widespread literacy among the general population, as they reflect the work of professional scribes and highly skilled masons. As Stein has pointed out, the wording of even the most personal letters suggests that the sender did not compose the

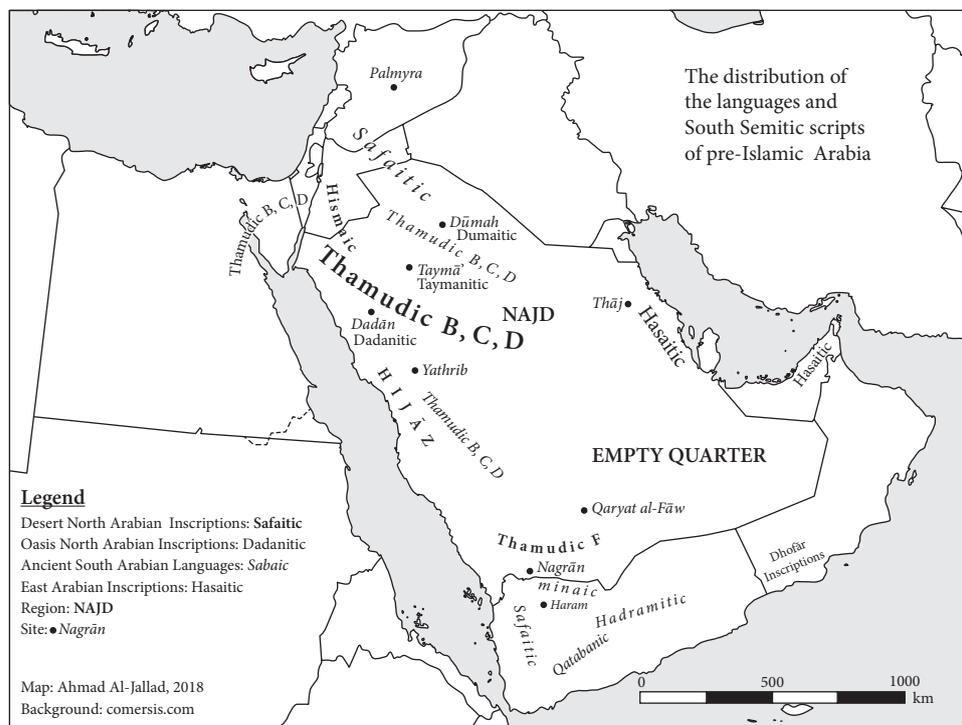


FIGURE 7.2 Distribution of the scripts and languages of pre-Islamic Arabia. © A. Al-Jallad.

text himself, and that recipients were not expected to read them. To explain this, he hypothesized the existence of scribal centres where documents were composed on the behalf of their authors (2005: 148–50). On the other hand, Macdonald (2010: 8) draws our attention to another category of inscriptions in South Arabia that intimates widespread knowledge of reading and writing: *graffiti*. Unlike commissioned inscriptions, graffiti are informal works of individual expression, and, as such, must be carved by the author. The existence of thousands of graffiti in South Arabia, always composed in the monumental and only rarely the minuscule script, suggests that a sizable segment of the population could employ writing for informal purposes. The use of the monumental script rather than the day-to-day script of the wooden sticks could have been symptomatic of the medium and need not imply that knowledge of the minuscule hand was more restricted.

THE evidence for the major oasis towns of North and West Arabia is not as plentiful. Nevertheless, AFTER a close and skillful analysis of the material, focusing mainly on the appearance of informal letter forms and ligatures in the inscriptions, Macdonald concluded that the settled populations of these areas also belonged to literate societies, and, as in South Arabia, large segments of the population knew how to write, and presumably, read (2010: 9–15).

THE nomadic societies of Arabia and the southern Levant, on the other hand, cannot be considered literate according to Macdonald's definition. THEY would have had no need to compose administrative or legal texts, and perishable materials were hard to come by. THE tens of thousands of rock graffiti scattered throughout the deserts of Arabia and the southern Levant, however, indicate that a large number of nomads were able to read and write. Macdonald hypothesized that nomads simply learned writing from the inhabitants of the oasis towns out of curiosity, and used it to pass the hours in the desert as they watched over their herds (2009: 1: 78–82). Nevertheless, most of the inscriptions they composed follow strict stylistic and thematic conventions. THESE conventions, moreover, DIFFER from corpus to corpus, suggesting that distinct writing traditions, as it were, were associated with the various ANA scripts. Research into the ideological conditions under which these texts were produce will no doubt shed light as to the intentions of their authors and their purpose.

.....DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARABIC SCRIPT.....

Like Ancient South Arabia, the Nabataean kingdom of north-west Arabia was also a literate society. However, an important difference distinguished the two. Stein argued convincingly that the language of written documents in South Arabia, whether on stone or on the sticks, must have been rather close to the vernacular, while in the Classical Nabataean period, a form of Achaemenid Official Aramaic was used for inscriptions and administration, even though it is unlikely that it was used as a spoken language among its population. It is difficult to determine from this chronological distance how

diverse Nabataea was linguistically, but we can be sure that a large segment of its population spoke some form(s) of Arabic, perhaps alongside dialects of western Aramaic. THE SUBSTRATAL INFLUENCE of Arabic on the syntax—such as the optative use of the SUFFIX conjugation—of Nabataean Aramaic is obvious throughout the corpus. THE Nabataean legal papyri from the Dead Sea have yielded dozens of Arabic technical terms, which Macdonald suggested could point towards the use of Arabic orally in Nabataean legal proceedings (2010: 19). Arabic loanwords occasionally enter the inscriptions of North Arabia and the Sinai, but a skilled scribe could have easily avoided these and so they cannot, in and of themselves, delimit the geographic distribution of Arabic as a vernacular. Macdonald reconstructs a situation in which Nabataea, or at least its southern parts, was inherently bilingual. Arabic was used for spoken communication, religious liturgies, oral literary works, and face-to-face political administrative and legal activity, while Aramaic expressed these functions in written form (2010: 20). THE FINDING of a long Arabic-language inscription in Madaba in the Himaic script (Graf and Zwettler 2004) and the distribution of Arabic vocabulary and onomastica in Greek transcription (Al-Jallad 2017), however, suggest that Arabic was much more widely spoken in the central and perhaps northern parts of the kingdom as well.

THE use of Nabataean Aramaic for inscriptions, both public and graffiti, continued even AFTER Rome's annexation of the kingdom in the early second century CE, but became more and more restricted to the southern areas of the kingdom, while Greek replaced Aramaic in the north. THIS period saw the gradual increase in the cursive character of the Nabataean script and the more extensive use of ligatures. THE inscriptions exhibiting a more cursive character are termed 'Nabataeo-Arabic' by Laila Nehmé (2010), the leading scholar working on this material. THESE texts lie in terms of development between 'Classical Nabataean', namely, the script employed in monuments at Ḥeġrā (modern Madain Saleh) and Petra, and the early Arabic script. While rock inscriptions constitute our only evidence for the transitional script, the cursive developments which characterize it likely took place on perishable materials, rather than through the vehicle of graffiti, as cursive forms develop to economize writing with a pen and ink (Macdonald 2010: 52).

THE appearance of this transitional script on stone strongly suggests that scribes continued to write extensively in the Nabataean script on perishable materials following the second century CE, and that the classical calligraphic script, typically used to produce rock inscriptions, began to give way to the book hand. We can only guess as to the language and the content of the post-classical Nabataean writings. It seems safe to assume that administrative and legal texts made up the bulk of this material, but whether writing was extended to other domains is impossible to determine. It is also important to remember that not all Arabic speech communities made use of the Nabataeo-Arabic script. Many Arabic speakers in the north simply used Greek for administration, as evidenced by the Petra Papyri (sixth century CE). THE concentration of inscriptions in the Nabataeo-Arabic script in north-west Arabia suggests that it developed at the chancelleries of the principalities in this area, who then brought it to Syria in the late FIFTH or early sixth century CE (Nehmé 2013:14). In the past decade, the corpus of Arabic-script inscriptions has grown steadily, and now includes new texts from across Arabia, Najrān

(Robin et al. 2014),³ Dumat al-Jandal (Nehmé 2017), and the Ḥigāz (unpublished). These join the well-known inscriptions from Syria—Zebed, Ḥarrān, and Usays (see Macdonald's contribution to Fiema et al. 2015 for an outline of these texts and further bibliography).⁴

In addition to the intrusions of cursive forms from the day-to-day script, the later inscriptions are also characterized by a growing presence of Arabic lexical and grammatical features. The increase in the appearance of Arabic forms does not necessitate a decline in the knowledge of Aramaic, but signals a growing trend in the use of the vernacular for written expression. Indeed, perfectly fine Aramaic inscriptions are produced in Arabia as late as the fourth and fifth centuries CE. Thus, the growing body of pre-Islamic evidence strongly indicates that the use of Arabic for administration in the early Islamic period does not reflect an ad hoc invention, but the continuation of an established tradition of administration in Arabic which must have its origins in North Arabian and Syrian scribal practices.

MULTILINGUALISM

The Nabataean inscriptions not only illustrate the gradual emergence of the Arabic script, but they also bear witness to centuries of Arabic-Aramaic language contact and bilingualism. One of the earliest examples of this is two lines of an Arabic prayer set within a Nabataean Aramaic votive text, which contextually pre-dates 150 CE, the so-called ʿĒn ʿAvdat inscription (for the *editio princeps*, see Negev 1986; for further bibliography, see Macdonald 2008). Authors of Nabataean graffiti from the Sinai, which usually begin with the passive participle of \sqrt{dkr} 'may he be remembered', occasionally substitute Arabic *mdkwr* for Aramaic *dkyr*. Since *dkyr* is one of the most commonly used words in Nabataean inscriptional formulae, it is unlikely that these authors were unaware of the Aramaic form, but rather made a conscious choice to use Arabic.

One of the best examples of Arabic-Aramaic contact is the epitaph of *Raqōš bint ʿabd manōtō* (JSNab 17, 267 CE).⁵ The text exhibits a mix of Arabic and Aramaic vocabulary and grammar, and has been the subject of widely differing interpretations. Blau (1977: 11), for instance, called the inscription 'almost pure Arabic', implying that the intention was to compose an Arabic inscription, and the Aramaicisms were intrusions, while others have attributed the presence of Arabic to the author's poor grasp of Aramaic.

³ These nine short texts were discovered by the Franco-Saudi epigraphic survey mission near Bir Ḥimā, north of Najrān. They appear to have been produced by travellers from the north, as the two dated ones use the era of the Roman Province of Arabia.

⁴ Recently, nine short texts on a trade route near Nagran in the transitional script have been discovered, one dated to the late fifth century according to the era of the Roman Province of Arabia. This would suggest that those who inscribed these texts were travellers from the North.

⁵ For the latest edition, see Macdonald's contribution to Fiema et al. 2015.

If we, however, look at the distribution of the two languages, another scenario seems more likely.

JSNab 17 (Aramaic is bolded)

1. ***dnh** qbrw šn^c-h k^cbw br*
2. *hrtt l-rqš **brt***
3. *ʿbdmⁿwtw ʾm-h w hy*
4. *hlkt py ʾl-ḥgrw*
5. *šnt **m^h** w š^tyn*
6. *w tryn **b-yrḥ** tmwz w lⁿ*
7. *mry ʿlm^ʾ mn yšⁿ^c ʾl-qbrw*
8. *d[ʾ] w mn yptḥ-h ḥšy (w)*
9. *wld -h w lⁿ mn yqbr w {y}ʿly mn -h*

‘(1) **This** is the tomb which Kaʿbō **son** of Ḥāretah built (2) for Rqwš **daughter** (3) of ʿbdmⁿwtw his mother, and she (4) died in ʾal-Ḥegrō (= Ḥegrā) (5) in the year **one hundred and sixty** (6) **two in the month of Tammūz** so may (7) Mry-ʿlm^ʾ (lit. lord of eternity) curse whosoever alters⁶ this tomb (8) or opens it except (9) his children and may he curse whosoever buries or removes from it [a body].’

The distribution of the Arabic makes it unlikely that the author was filling in gaps of his knowledge of Aramaic. Surely, the Aramaic name of Ḥegrā, ḥgr^ʾ, was still known, and the author could have easily used the preposition *b-* instead of Arabic *py*⁷ in line 4, as line 6 clearly shows its function was known to him. Aramaic is used for patronymics, introductory and dating formulae, and the divine epithet *mry ʿlm^ʾ*. The remaining content is Arabic. I would therefore suggest that this distribution points towards code-switching between Arabic and Aramaic, and may reflect the balance between the two languages at Ḥegrā, and perhaps elsewhere in Nabataea. Dating formulae and divine epithets belong to the class of vocabulary usually expressed by Aramaic, while the prose was composed in Arabic, similar to the way in which Moroccan speakers of Arabic might switch to French to express certain concepts.

Another interesting source for Arabic-Aramaic bilingualism comes from the Greek papyri of Petra (sixth century CE). This corpus contains the private documents dealing with matters such as property disputes, inheritance, and tax records. The documents include names of the plots of land, houses, and slaves, most of which are of Semitic extraction. The micro-toponymy provides interesting evidence for language contact. Two plots of land in P. Petra 17 are derived from the Semitic root *qšb*, but one of them carries the Arabic definite article *Alkεσβ/al-qεšeb*/while the other has the Aramaic suffixed article *ā, Kισβα/qišbā*/. Likewise, P. Petra 17 *Alvασβα/al-našbah*/'the farm'

⁶ The sense of the root *šn^c* 'to alter' is found in Aramaic but is not known in Classical Arabic, but it is uncertain if the word had this sense in Old Arabic as well, so I have not bolded it.

⁷ The Aramaic *p* glyph is used to represent Arabic *f*. Moreover, it is unclear how this sound was pronounced in Old Arabic, and [p] is certainly a possibility (see Al-Jallad 2017).

appears to be the Arabic equivalent of Aramaic *Naṣḃaṃa/naṣḃatā/in* 98v.⁸ Aramaic loans into the local Arabic dialect also preserve their Aramaic morphology. The word *Χαφφαθ/kaffat/*, perhaps the equivalent of Greek *θημοβολών* ‘grain depository’, seems to be of Aramaic origin and forms an Aramaic plural, *Χαφφι/kaffi/* (Al-Jallad et al. 2013: 38–9). All three cases reflect an awareness of Aramaic grammar on the part of the Arabic-speaking population of Petra.

Arabic-Greek contact is more difficult to assess in the pre-Islamic period. Two of the three pre-Islamic inscriptions in the Arabic script from Syria accompany a Greek text. A few important bilingual Greek-Safaitic inscriptions also indicate that at least some members of the nomadic communities of the Syro-Arabian desert had a command of Greek:⁹

l nṣrʔl bn ʿlw ʿby Naṣrʿel son of ʿAlwʿ

Μνησθη Naσρηλος Αλουου ‘may Naṣrʿel son of ʿAlw be remembered’

THE INSCRIPTIONS AND THE LITERARY BACKGROUND OF THE QURʿAN

Poetry, it seems, was not often put into writing in South Arabia, and so our examples of this genre of oral literature are limited. The few poetic texts discovered so far exhibit striking structural parallels with the Qurʿan, especially the shorter, mystical suras which are assumed to be of an earlier provenance. The South Arabian Hymn of Qāniya, which was produced at the end of the first century CE, in the Middle Sabaic period, addresses the goddess S²ms¹ (*Shams*) and consists of twenty-seven lines, each containing roughly four words, ending in the rhyme *hk*. While most rhyme sequences in the Qurʿan are based on a single vowel-consonant sequence, consonant-vowel-consonant rhymes also exist, for example 75:21–5 in *rah*, but never spanning an entire sura. Even though the exact meaning of this hymn continues to elude scholars, its structural similarity to some of the Meccan suras, such as Q. 87, which consists of nineteen lines of a similar length all ending in *y*, is striking (Beeston 1994).

South Arabian Hymn of Qāniya	Quran 75:21–4
3. <i>w-krnw s²d b-qs¹d qs¹hk</i>	Ṣ#ž wa taḡarūna l- ² āḥiraḥ
4. <i>(w-ḥb) ʿlhn d-yhr fqhk</i>	ṢṢwuḡūhun yawma ʿidin nāḡiraḥ
5. <i>(w-yt)lt ʿ(?)db ṣl^c fdhk</i>	ṢṢilā rabbihā nāḡiraḥ
6. <i>(w-my)n ms²qr hn-bḥr wshk</i>	ṢṢwuḡūhun yawm ² idin bāsiraḥ

⁸ Inventory 98 will appear in volume 5 of the Petra Papyri.

⁹ This text was published with a photograph in Macdonald (2009: 1: 76–7).

The votive inscription ZI 11 resembles even more closely Qur'anic style.¹⁰ The inscription contains an introductory formula and six strophes of four verses, each unified by a single rhyme letter, *l*, *k*, *l*, *h*, *m*, *q*. This text is comparable to Meccan suras, such as Q. 75 and Q.84, in which the verses are typically composed of three to six words, and have six changes of rhyme throughout the composition. (See Stein (2008) for a discussion on the language of these texts and bibliography.)

South Arabian ZI 11	Quran 84:16-23
<i>b-khl k-bgw twn khl</i>	16. <i>fa-lā 'uqsimu biš-šafaq</i>
<i>w-kl 'qrr-k ḥs'3l</i>	17. <i>wal-layli wa-ḥmā wasaq</i>
<i>ḥms¹-k mr²-n dll</i>	18. <i>wal-qamari 'iqā ttasaq</i>
<i>kl ḡ-^cly w-s¹fl</i>	19. <i>la-tarkabunna ṭabaqan 'an ṭabaq</i>
<i>b-khl bhṭ ḡ- whn ḡrḥ</i>	20. <i>fa-mā lahum lā yu 'minūn</i>
<i>hrd ḡ-mlwb w?- rzḥ</i>	21. <i>wa 'iḡa quri 'a 'alayhimu l-qur'ānu lā yasḡudūn</i>
<i>'lmq ḡ-hs¹kr 'rmḥ</i>	22. <i>bali llaḡina kafarū yukaddibūn</i>
<i>ṭḥt-k 'ḥms¹ rḡḥ</i>	23. <i>wallāhu 'a'lamu bimā yū'ūn</i>

Other poems bear a closer resemblance to Arabic metrical poetry. The inscription VL 24 = Ja 2353 (see Stein 2008) contains ten lines which can be split into half-verses rhyming in *r*, although lines four and six terminate in *n*. Not only is *r* one of the most frequent rhyme letters of the Qur'an, but Qur'anic style also permits a rhyme with the liquids *l* and *n*. Whether such compositions acted as a proto-type for the Qur'anic stylistic conventions is at the moment unclear, but further research into the stylistic connections between the Qur'an and such inscriptions will no doubt prove to be a fruitful endeavour.

In addition to style, the ASA inscriptions contain many parallels in content. By the fourth century CE, references to the pagan gods disappear almost entirely from the inscriptions, ushering in what scholars have termed the 'monotheistic period'. In their place, a new, single god is venerated, *Rḥmnn*, literally 'the merciful', which finds a direct Arabic equivalent in *al-rahmān*, who is equated with Allāh in the Qur'an (Q.17:110). Other literary phrases common to monotheistic South Arabian inscriptions, specifically the Jewish ones, and the Qur'an are found. An epithet of *Rḥmnn*, *mr² s¹myn w- 'rḡn* 'lord of the heavens and the earth', has a transparent Qur'anic equivalent: *rabbu s-samāwāti wa-l-'arḡi* 'idem'. In another Jewish inscription, the following is attested: [*b*]rk w tbrk s¹m rḡ mnn 'may the name of *Rḥmnn* bless and be blessed', which is essentially equivalent to Q. 55:78 *tabāraka smu rabbika* 'blessed is the name of your lord'.¹¹ While religious terms such as 'prayer' *šlt* = Qur'an *šlwh*, vowelled *ṣalāh*, and 'aid/assistance' *zkt* = Qur'an *zkwh*, vowelled *zakāh*, are also attested in Jewish South Arabian inscriptions, their spellings in the Qur'an preclude a South Arabian origin (see Jeffery 2007).

¹⁰ For a partial translation of this text, see al-'Iryāni (2005). See Stein (2008) for a refutation of the Himyaritic hypothesis for which these texts have been used to advance.

¹¹ See Robin (2004: appendix 1) for the inscriptions and bibliography.

A remarkable graffito recently published in the minuscule South Arabian script (Al-Hajj and Faq'as 2018) attests a late pre-Islamic variant of the Basmala and a prayer to God in using vocabulary and style strikingly similar to the Qur'an, and later Islamic phraseology, but not identical to it.¹²

bsmlh rḥmn rḥmn rb smwt

'In the name of Allāh, Raḥmān; Raḥmān lord of the heavens'

rzq-n m-fḏl-k w-ṯr-n mḥ-h skmt ṽymn

'Bless us from your favor and grant us the best of it: the gift of faith'

The inscriptions of the nomads also yield valuable points of comparison. The seeking of refuge, Qur'an 2:67,, 'a'ūdu bi-llāhi 'I seek refuge in Allāh' is comparable to Safaitic WH 390 'wḏ b- Rḏy 'he sought refuge in (the god) Rḏy', or WH 3923 'w{ḏ} b- {h}- {ḏ}lh 'he sought refuge in God (lit. the god). The *qasam* 'oath' (cf. Q. 70:40) is attested in SIJ 293 'qsm b-ḏh ḥy 'he swore by ḏh ('allāh or ḏilāh) who is living'. Divine qualities associated with the monotheistic deity are also attributed to the pre-Islamic gods. They are *ḥy* 'living' (SIJ 293; cf. Q. 2:225 *al-ḥayyū*) and 'merciful' *rḥm* (C 4341; Q. *ar-raḥīm passim*); they grant life *ḥyy* (C 4803; cf. Q. 2:28 *yuhyi*), cause death *ymyt* (C 4341; cf. Q. 2:28 *yumītu*). They 'curse' wrong-doers *l'n* (LP 360; cf. Q. 33:64 *la'ana*) and bless the faithful *wyh brk* (AWS 218; cf. 7:131 *bāraknā*). God, as the knower of the unseen, Qur'an 'ālimu *l-ḡayb*, is also paralleled in a divine name in Safaitic (KRS 3074) 'lt ḡb 'goddess of the unseen'. The deity as 'owner' or 'sovereign' of heaven *h mlk h-s'my* 'O sovereign of the sky/heaven' (KRS 1944) offers a close parallel to the common Qur'anic phrase *lillāhi mulku s-samāwāti wal-ʿarḏ* 'For Allah is the dominion of the heavens and the earth'. The use of natural phenomenon as a symbol of divine power is also attested, Safaitic (KRS 2453) *mykn ḥlf lyly-h w ḡwm-h* 'established is the alternation of his nights and days', compare with Qur'an 23:80 'and his is the alternation of night and day'.

The inscriptions also offer us a small view of religion and ritual among the pre-Islamic nomads. One writer records that he performed a ritual ablution *rḥd* before embarking on a pilgrimage *ḥg* (WH 3053). Other rituals include animal sacrifice *ḏbh* (C 853), building cairns over the dead *rgm* (WH 234), erecting sacred stones *nṣb* (C 527) as representations of deities, and giving burnt offerings 'sly (SIJ 293). Perhaps most interesting is the religious/ritualistic role of writing and reading. Authors often invoke a god to bestow blessings upon those who read their inscriptions aloud, and to curse those who efface them—HaNSB 307 *d'cy ḏ [l]t ḏ mn yḥbl-h* 'he called upon (d'cy) Lt against whosoever would efface it (the inscription)'. Texts such as these also indicate that the Aramaic terms *qr* 'to read' and *ktb* 'to write' had entered Arabic, presumably through Nabataean Aramaic, at a very early period, and were not the result of the spread of Christianity in Arabia.

¹² The reading and interpretation provided is my own. The *editio princeps* offers two different understandings of the text, differing in minor points of grammar.

- C 4803: *ʿwr {l}- d̄ y ʿwr h-sʿfr w hyy l- d̄ yqrʿ h-ktb*
 ‘may he who would efface this writing go blind and may he who would
 read this writing aloud have long life’
- MNM b 6: *dkrt lt mhrsʿ bn ḥlflh bn whbn w kll ʿsʿr ṣdq w kll mn yqry wqʿ-n dh*
 ‘may Lt be mindful of Mhrsʿ son of Ḥlflh son of Whbn and all true
 kinsmen and all who read this inscription of ours’

Several of the deities mentioned in the Qurʿan are encountered in the inscriptions. The three goddess mentioned in Q. 53:19–22, *allāt*, *al-ʿuzzā*, and *manāt*, were worshipped in Nabataea, and with varying degrees of popularity in north-west Arabia. *Allāt* was the most popular deity in North Arabia, invoked in almost all of the epi-graphic corpora, and was probably the most ancient; she is found in theophoric names dating back to the early first millennium BCE. *Al-ʿUzzā* is also encountered in the inscriptions, but her worship was more restricted. She is limited to theophoric names in the Safaitic and Hismaic inscriptions, but was especially popular among the Nabataeans (Healey 2001: 114ff.), and is found in theophoric names at Dadān with the *hn* article, that is, *hn-ʿzy*.

After a meticulous study of the distribution of *Lt* and *ʿlzy* in the Nabataean inscriptions, Healey suggests that the latter was an epithet of *Allāt*, meaning ‘the mightiest’ (Healey 2001: 114). There is also some evidence to suggest that *Lt* was a mother goddess, if Healey’s interpretation of the inscription on an altar of *Lt* (CIS II, 185) as *ʿm ʿlhy dy mʿrnʿ rbʿl* ‘the mother of the gods of our lord, Rabbel’ is correct (Healey 2001: 109–10). In Safaitic, *Allāt* was regarded as the daughter of *Rḏw/y*, defied ‘satisfaction’ (AWS 283, 291).

The third member of the Qurʿanic trinity, *mnwh*, also makes an appearance in the inscriptions, but is not as common in the North Arabian and Nabataean inscriptions as *Lt* and *ʿzy*. She frequently appears in conjunction with *Dusares*, the principal Nabataean deity, in the inscriptions of Ḥegrā (Healey 2001: 132–3). An important clue regarding the pronunciation of this deity’s name comes from a Latin inscription in Hungary (CIL III, 7954), dedicated by a Palmyrene, in which her name is spelled *MANAVAT*, suggesting an original pronunciation, *manawat*-. In Arabia, it seems that the sequence *awa* monophthongized to */ō/*, as suggested by Nabataean spellings *mnwtw* =/*manōtō*/, Safaitic and Hismaic *ʿsmnt*, Dadanitic *zdmnt*, and even South Arabian *ʿbdmntm*. The Qurʿanic *mnwh* probably signals the pronunciation *manōh*, suggesting the following sound changes: *manawat* > *manawah* > *manōh*. *Mnwtw* seems to be a deification of fate, which is depicted as dooming the living in the common Safaitic epithet, *rḡm mny* ‘struck down by Fate’.

Interestingly, no inscriptions mention all three goddesses together as we find in Q. 53:19–20 ‘have you considered ʿlt (vocalized, *allāt*) and ʿlzy (vocalized *al-ʿuzzā*)? and *Mnwh* (vocalized *manāt*) the third and last one?’ or imply that they were daughters of the principal deity, as in Q. 53:21 ‘is the male for you and for him the female?’

CONCLUDING REMARK

The historical-critical study of the Qur'an based on the growing body of documentary evidence from the pre-Islamic period is in its infancy. The proper utilization of this material has the potential to transform our understanding of the composition and language of the text. Many desiderata remain, perhaps most importantly an independent linguistic study of the consonantal skeleton of the Qur'an in light of the pre-Islamic epigraphy and a lexical study of Qur'anic vocabulary in light of the North Arabian inscriptions.

Sigla

AWS	Safaitic inscriptions in Alolow 1996
C	Safaitic inscriptions in <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars V.</i> Paris, 1950–1
ESK	Thamudic inscriptions in Eskoubi 1999
HaNSB	Safaitic Inscriptions in Ḥarāḥiṣah 2010
SIJ	Safaitic inscriptions in Winnett 1957
SESP.U	Thamudic Inscription in Macdonald et al. 1996
WH	Safaitic inscriptions in Winnett and Harding 1978
WTay	Taymanitic inscriptions in Winnett and Reed 1970
WTI	Dumaitic, Hismaic, and Thamudic B, C, and D inscriptions in Winnett and Reed 1970

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