

# The Damascus Psalm Fragment

Middle Arabic and the Legacy of Old Ḥigāzī

Ahmad Al-Jallad

with a contribution by Ronny Vollandt

To appear in LAMINE, Oriental Institute

PREVIEW



## Contents

1 The History of Arabic through its texts.....	4
2 The Psalm Fragment: Script, Phonology, and Morphology.....	11
Previous Studies .....	12
The Writing System .....	13
Orthography.....	13
Vowel Length and stress.....	14
The elongated Iota.....	14
Hypsilon and the rough breathing .....	14
Gemination .....	15
Word/syllable dividers .....	15
The Influence of Arabic Orthography.....	15
Linguistic description .....	17
Phonology .....	17
Short Vowels.....	17
Long vowels.....	19
The diphthongs .....	19
The triphthongs.....	20
Consonants .....	20
Stops and interdentals .....	20
The velar and pharyngeal fricatives.....	21
The status of <i>g</i> .....	21
The <i>ṣād</i> .....	22
The <i>ḍ</i> and <i>ḍ</i> (= <i>z</i> ) .....	22
The Qāf.....	23
The velarized / .....	23
Nominal Morphology.....	23
Noun Patterns.....	23
Final short vowels .....	26
Vestiges of case.....	27
The feminine ending .....	29
The definite article.....	30
Plurals.....	31

Pronouns .....	31
The Prepositions .....	34
Conjunctions .....	35
The Verb .....	35
Syntax .....	42
3 Dating and Localizing the Document, Writing System, and Language.....	44
Dating the document .....	44
The nature of the transcription system and its date.....	50
Dating and localizing the language .....	57
Linguistic features .....	58
Reviewing the linguistic facts .....	65
Excursus: The dialect of the Ghassanids.....	65
Bringing it all together.....	68
4 Old Arabic, Middle Arabic, and Old Ḥigāzī .....	71
The QCT and 1 <sup>st</sup> c. A.H. documents – taking orthography seriously .....	73
From the QCT to the first conquest century material and beyond .....	78
Old Ḥigāzī in the Grammatical Sources .....	83
Colloquial features in direct speech in the QCT?.....	85
Whence Classical Arabic? a proposal.....	86
Excursus Ṣarabī mubīn.....	90
5 Edition of the Arabic columns of the Damascus Psalm Fragment.....	96
Appendix I: Beyond Arabic in Greek letters: The scribal and translational context of the Violet Fragment ( <b>Ronny Vollandt</b> ) .....	112
Appendix 2: Pre-Islamic Graeco-Arabic texts .....	135
The Psalm Fragment.....	150
References .....	155

# 1 The History of Arabic through its texts

Early Muslim society felt a degree of discomfort with the written word. Its highest form of literature, poetry, was oral and writing it down was deemed unnatural. The Quran, widely regarded as Arabic's first book, began as an oral text. According to tradition, the Caliph 'Uthmān faced considerable resistance when he decreed that it be put into a standardized written form. Even as late as the 8<sup>th</sup> century, a great debate raged – was it permissible to commit to writing the Hadith, the oral sayings about the life and times of the Islamic Prophet?<sup>1</sup> While its proponents won the day, it was a hard fought battle, and the attitude of oral supremacy persisted. Writing was ultimately involved in teaching and lecturing, but it was always regarded as a supplementary tool. The written word could serve as a memory aid, but was certainly not the primary source of knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

The Arab Grammarians, in their description of the language, thus did not turn to the copious documents available at their time, nor did they draw on the conventions of the scribal schools or chancelleries. Rather, the Arabic that concerned them was its oral form – the language of Arabian tribesmen and their oral literature, in particular those who were in possession of “reliable” Arabic.<sup>3</sup> While the Grammarians never made explicit what their criterion for reliable Arabic was, it is safe to assume that they meant varieties that still inflected for nominal case and verbal mood. Although there are a few skeptical voices,<sup>4</sup> most specialists regard the data contained in the corpus of Arabic grammatical literature as authentic examples of select 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century Bedouin dialects.

The Arabic grammatical tradition was a synchronic endeavor, and lacked an explicit historical dimension. Therefore, the Arabic documented and prescribed as correct in the late 8<sup>th</sup> and early 9<sup>th</sup> century was not chronologically fixed to that era. On the contrary, it was regarded as representative of the language of Arabia's tribesmen from time immemorial, and first experienced change once non-Arabic speakers began to acquire it following the Arab Conquests. Within this conceptual framework, only two types of Arabic can exist – the pre-Islamic varieties of pure Arabic, i.e. characterized by a fully functioning nominal case system,<sup>5</sup> and post-conquest varieties usually termed ‘Neo-

---

<sup>1</sup> Cook, “Opponents.”

<sup>2</sup> See Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written*, on the relationship between the oral and written in early Islam; for a summary of these views and further ideas, see Schoeler, “Literacy and Memory.”

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent overview of the Arabic Grammatical Tradition, see Versteegh, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought III*. On the methods of Sibawayh and his selection of data, see the thorough discussion in Carter, *Sibawayhi*.

<sup>4</sup> Owens, *A Linguistic History of Arabic*, p. 93, for example has argued that there is no pure data to be found in the *Kitāb* of Sibawayh and that everything he writes or observes is filtered through his grammatical thinking. This extreme view, however, remains a minority position.

<sup>5</sup> In the literature these varieties are often referred to as *fuṣṣḥā* ‘purest’, Classical Arabic, or sometimes even Old Arabic.

Arabic', the result of imperfect second language acquisition, and characterized by a reduced morphology and substandard pronunciation.

Like so many of its inheritances from Muslim tradition, a certain distrust for the written is also a characteristic of the enterprise of Arabic philology and linguistics, and this has had a profound influence on the reconstruction of Arabic's history. Modern scholars have generally taken for granted the antiquity and universality of the Arabic of the Grammarians. Earlier written texts, such as the papyri from the 7<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE and the Quran, the earliest manuscripts of which precede the Grammatical Tradition by more than a century, are conventionally interpreted according to much later norms, without the need for justification. Any reader of these texts will notice that the oral component differs from the written in significant ways. Just to illustrate, consider the word ملكه in Q 66:6. All reading traditions instruct that this word should be pronounced as [malāʔikatan]; these traditions go back to the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest, while the true 7<sup>th</sup> century form is the written artefact, *mlykh* – lacking the final syllable *tan*. In the same vein, the word بروا in Q60:4 is read unanimously as *buraʔāʔu*, while at least two syllables are missing in the spelling.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that the written in these cases is demonstrably older than the reading traditions, the oral is given default preference, and the differences are *a priori* reduced to orthographic convention.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, most scholars have assumed that the language behind the most ancient component of the Quran, its Consonantal Text, is more or less identical to the language recited in the halls of Al-Azhar today. It is only in very recent years that the QCT has enjoyed study as an epigraphic document, interrogating the text for linguistic facts rather than assuming them. These efforts have led to a radically different view of the language of its composition.<sup>8</sup>

In the same way, Arabic-language documentary texts from the first Islamic century are generally assumed to be “Classical Arabic”. And when they deviate, the irregularities are taken as examples of a diglossic situation comparable to the present day, where speakers of “Neo-Arabic” err in their writing of the Classical standard. Thus, these early texts are regarded as mixed between the two essential varieties of Arabic, the Classical language and Neo-Arabic, rather than representing a language variety in their own right. The anachronistic nature of this approach is rarely appreciated.

---

<sup>6</sup> The earliest reading traditions date from the 730s, but most come from the late 8<sup>th</sup> and early 9<sup>th</sup> century; see Bell and Watt, *Introduction to the Qurʾān*, p. 49. On the transmission of the readings and their characteristic features, see Nasser, *Transmission*.

<sup>7</sup> This approach is characterized by Diem's articles on Arabic orthography (“Glimpses”; “arabischen Orthographie I, II, III”). Some of the Quranic reading traditions contain forms more closely matching the orthography of the texts, yet since the Arabic of the Grammatical Tradition is given the most weight, these are still interpreted as secondary. For example, the realization of the *alif-maqṣūrah* in the tradition of Warsh ʕan Nāfiʕ is [ē], a better fit for its spelling in the QCT as ى. Nevertheless, this is conceptualized as a secondary development, \*ā > ē, the result of so-called *imālah*. Indeed, despite the graphic congruity, Diem, “arabischen Orthographie III,” insists that the realization of this glyph in the Quran was [ā]. For a convincing argument for an original ē-value, see Van Putten, “Triphthongs.”

<sup>8</sup> On this approach, see Ch. 4.

The distrust of the written and the timelessness of the oral have greatly reduced the value of the early Arabic documentary evidence. Ancient texts are forced into the model of Classical Arabic, thus losing any opportunity to contribute to our understanding of Arabic's earliest stages independently. Consider Bellamy's rendition of this 4<sup>th</sup> century Levantine Arabic text, the Namārah inscription,<sup>9</sup> into the standardized variety of the 9<sup>th</sup> century:

Reading: *ty npš mr'lqyš br 'mrw mlk 'l-'rb*

Bellamy: *tī nafsu mri?i l-qaysi bar ŕamrin maliki l-ŕarabi*

'this is the funerary monument of Mr'lqys son of 'mrw king of the Arabs'

The Namārah Inscription contains many features unknown in standard Classical Arabic, and rare in the works of the Arabic Grammarians, such as the demonstrative *tī*, the word *nafs* for funerary monument, and the adverbial particle *'kdy*. Other aspects, that are equally linguistically informative, are overlooked, such as the fact that the definite article is written as *'l* in all contexts, even before coronal consonants: *'ltg = ʔal-tāg* and not *at-tāg* or *'lšŕwb = ʔal-šurŕb* rather than *aš-šurŕb*. While this is a spelling convention by the 8<sup>th</sup> century, how can we be certain it was simply that in this early period? After all, spelling conventions usually have their origin in an earlier stage of the language.<sup>10</sup>

The filter of Classical Arabic creates an artificial uniformity across space and time. Differences in texts and genres are explained away as orthographic peculiarities or simply the result of putting into writing an unwritten language.<sup>11</sup> Beeston proclaims that the Namārah Inscription and the grave inscription of Rbbl son of Hf'm from Qaryat al-Fāw<sup>12</sup> express a nearly identical idiom and are "drafted in what is recognizably almost pure 'Classical Arabic'".<sup>13</sup> This view can only be maintained if one ignores the written

---

<sup>9</sup> Bellamy, "A New Reading of the Namara Inscription." The Namārah Inscription, named after the area in southern Syria in which it was discovered, is the epitaph of a *mr'lqyš br 'mrw* (Mar-al-Qays son of 'Amro), who is called 'king of all the Arabs.' Dated to 328 CE, it is one of the earliest examples of Arabic prose written in the Nabataean script. For the most recent discussion of the text, see Macdonald's contribution to Fiema et al., "Provincia Arabia."

<sup>10</sup> To illustrate this point, consider the case of English *night* [nart], which preserves in the orthography the evidence for an earlier fricative, although it has been lost in pronunciation (cf. German *nacht*). On the history of English spelling, see Scragg, *English Spelling*.

<sup>11</sup> On this practice, see Macdonald, "Written Word." I would argue that it is precisely because Arabic was not associated with a single script that the spellings of the language in this earlier period are to be regarded as phonetic as there was no target orthography for the writer to imitate.

<sup>12</sup> This inscription, in the Ancient South Arabian script but in a "North Arabian" idiom, comes from the excavations at Qaryat al-Fāw in south central Saudi Arabia, with an excellent photograph in al-Ansary, *Qaryat Al-Fau*. The text is undated, but scholars have speculated that it could be as old as the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE. The text has been discussed by a number of scholars, most notably, Beeston, "Nemara and Faw"; Robin, "arabie antique;" Macdonald, "Old Arabic;" Al-Jallad, "Genetic Background."

<sup>13</sup> Beeston, "Languages of Pre-Islamic Arabia," p. 83.

text itself. If one takes the orthography seriously, as one should as they are composed in different scripts, the two texts differ in almost every comparable way.<sup>14</sup>

The illusion of uniformity is no doubt aided by the defective nature of the Semitic writing systems. Most texts composed in a Semitic alphabet lend themselves to numerous interpretations. The absence of the graphic representation of short vowels has rendered most of the ancient epigraphic material silent on some of the major questions in Arabic historical linguistics – the fate of the Proto-Semitic case system, syllable structure, vowel quality, etc. Moreover, scholarly transcription practices generally convey a great deal of uniformity where it is not found in the actual documents. The use of Classical Arabic transcription conventions such as *ḍ* and *ẓ* for Arabian glyphs representing the reflex of the same phonemes can imply that they were pronounced in the same way, although the scripts themselves offer no evidence for this.

One corpus has brought into relief the methodological pitfalls of reading ancient Arabic texts as Classical Arabic – the so-called pre-Islamic Graeco-Arabica. From the turn of the Era to the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, a copious amount of Arabic is attested in the form of anthroponyms transcribed into Greek from southern Syria and Jordan. These documents not only provide data about the vowels, but shed important light on the realization of the consonants and morphophonology. But only if one asks the right questions.

The thousands of Greek transcriptions, many informal graffiti, allow the careful linguist to form a detailed picture of Old Arabic phonology. From these we learn, for example, that the coda of the definite article did not in fact originally assimilate to coronals, that the most common realization of the high vowels was [o] and [e] rather than [u] and [i], final short high vowels had dropped off, and that the entire emphatic series was voiceless.<sup>15</sup> These texts come from the same region and the same time period as the Namārah Inscription and therefore would naturally be the first port of call for the vocalization of this text, rather than the Arabic documented in the late 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century by Grammarians in Iraq.

---

<sup>14</sup> For example, the grave epitaph of Qaryat al-Fāw has *mimation* and assimilates the coda of the article while these features are absent in the Namārah Inscription. The vowel of the 3ms pronoun seems to be long, *hw*, in Fāw, while short or absent altogether in Namārah, etc. On the features of this inscription and its classification, see Al-Jallad, “Genetic Background.”

<sup>15</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the linguistic features of pre-Islamic Arabic transcribed in Greek, see Al-Jallad, “Graeco-Arabica I.”

Table 1: Namārah Inscription vocalized according to Classical Arabic phonology versus northern Old Arabic

Classicized Inscription	Namārah	Northern Old Arabic vocalization
<i>tī nafsu imri?i l-qays BAR</i> <i>ʕamrin maliki l-ʕarabi kulli-</i> <i>hi [sic], dū ʔasara t-tāga</i>		<i>tī nap<sup>h</sup>s mar-ʔal-qays BAR</i> <i>ʕamro malk ʔal-ʕarab koll-</i> <i>ah, dū ʔasara ʔal-tāga</i>

Until 2015, the Damascus Psalm Fragment was regarded as the earliest example of the Arabic prose written in Greek letters.<sup>16</sup> In the fall of 2014, my colleague and collaborator Ali al-Manaser shared with me the photograph of a so-far unique Greek graffito. The photograph was taken by Prof. Sabri al-Abbadi in the early 2000's in the northeastern Jordanian Ḥarraḥ. Since then, it had been circulated among Hellenists, who regarded it as garbled nonsense by a barely literate person. As I examined the text, the last two lines immediately struck me: they contained a phrase I had encountered many times, and in many forms, in the Safaitic inscriptions -- *w r'y bql b-knn* 'and he pastured on fresh herbage during Kānūn'. This Graeco-Arabic rendition, however, gives precious information not contained in the consonantal Safaitic writing: (α)ουα ειραυ βακλα βιΧανου[v] = [wa yirʕaw baqla bi-kānūn] 'and they pastured on fresh herbage during Kānūn'. The prefix conjugation contained an [i] vowel, *yirʕaw* rather than Classical Arabic *yarʕaw*. The accusative case was simply [a] or [ā], *baqla ~ baqlā*, without nunation – a context form not known from Classical Arabic. Earlier in the inscription, the verb 'he came', Classical Arabic *ʔatā*, is spelled αθαοα [ʔatawa], a form not known from Classical or Modern Arabic but hinted at in Arabic orthography.

Table 2: A1 in light of later forms of Arabic

A1 <sup>17</sup>	Safaitic	Classical Arabic Orthography	Classical Arabic
αθαοα	'tw/'ty	اتى	<i>ʔatā</i>
βακλα	<i>bql</i> (acc.)	بقلا	<i>baqlan</i>
ειραυ	<i>yr<sup>ʕ</sup></i>	يرعوا	<i>yarʕaw</i>

<sup>16</sup> Earlier examples of isolated words and anthroponyms have been published; see, for example, the study of Isserlin, "Nessana Papyri."

<sup>17</sup> The *editio princeps* of this text is Al-Jallad and al-Manaser, "New Epigraphica I" and is re-edited in Appendix II of this book.

This text helps confirm what Safaitic<sup>18</sup> and Arabic orthography already strongly implied: the orthography of Arabic has its basis in a real dialect, and so the practice of reading all texts prior to the grammatical tradition as Classical Arabic is indefensible. This realization presents a new question: when did these phonetic spellings become orthographic conventions?

The careful and dispassionate study of Arabia's ancient epigraphy reveals a picture quite dissimilar from that presented in Muslim historical sources. The Arabic of the Grammarians is not met with; instead, the Peninsula displays a dazzling degree of linguistic diversity. The Old Arabic dialects differ in ways not recorded by the Grammarians, while features that figure prominently in the grammatical manuals are nowhere to be found. Consider nunation (*tanwīn*) – this is a standard feature of Classical Arabic, but in the consonantal South Semitic writing systems, Greek transcriptions, and in the Graeco-Arabic inscription A1, the feature is completely absent. While the absence of nunation in Arabic orthography is usually written off as a convention, there is no reason to assume such conventions when Arabic is written in other scripts, much less before the development of the Arabic script itself. These attestations can mean only one thing: nunation had disappeared in most forms of Old Arabic.

The study of the pre-Islamic epigraphic record brings into relief a glaring methodological flaw in the study of early Islamic documents. How can we be sure that the earliest Islamic Arabic texts, like the administrative papyri from the first Islamic century or the QCT, were aiming at Classical Arabic, especially considering that no evidence for such a standard is found in the pre-Islamic period? How can we know, for example, that a spelling such as فانفعل in a 1<sup>st</sup> c. A.H. document was meant to be pronounced as *fanfaʕala*, as in Classical Arabic, rather than *fa-ʔanfaʕel* as in the Psalm Fragment?<sup>19</sup> Can we be certain that early attestations of “sub-standard” forms like *lam yakūn* are hypercorrect literary syntagms rather than a reflection of living speech? Judgements of Arabic's earliest written documents have proceeded on the assumption that the Classical Arabic standard is timeless, but the facts now show the opposite.

The foregoing pages have made the case against privileging the language of the Arabic Grammatical Tradition or the modern spoken dialects over written testimonies of the past. While this is relatively uncontroversial in the pre-Islamic period, I would argue that the same principle is true for early Islamic texts as well. This book investigates Arabic's transformative historical phase, the passage from the pre-Islamic to the Islamic period, through a new approach. I ask: what would Arabic's history look like if we wrote it based on the documentary evidence rather than exclusively the oral? I frame this question through the linguistic investigation of the Damascus Psalm Fragment (PF) – the longest Arabic text composed in Greek letters and the earliest in the Islamic period. This

---

<sup>18</sup> For example, Safaitic, which does not employ vowel letters, indicates that III-y/w verbs terminated in a consonant, *'ty* 'he came', *bn̄y* 'he built', etc., corresponding to the *alif-maqṣūrah* in standard Arabic orthography. See Al-Jallad, *Outline*, 37-39, on the orthography of Safaitic.

<sup>19</sup> Compare with Psalm Fragment v.57, *ανκαλεβου* [ʔanqalebū] 'they rebelled'.

document affords us a glimpse of the phonology and morphology of the Arabic of its time – likely the mid- to late 9<sup>th</sup> century but possibly earlier. More importantly, a study of its structure and *raison d'être* show that its language must be regarded as the translation register of the vernacular, rather than the type of Middle Arabic described by Blau, where features from Classical Arabic mix with later varieties.<sup>20</sup> Its linguistic features, I believe, cast important light on the pre-Grammarians Arabic of the early conquests, and indeed on the dialect from which it likely sprung: Old Ḥigāzī.

The book begins with a detailed linguistic description of the PF on its own terms. Using the facts gained from this investigation, we will enter a discussion on its date, transcription system, and purpose. As a witness of early vernacular Arabic, we then move to understand its relationship with the early Arabic papyri, characterized by Blau as early Muslim Middle Arabic,<sup>21</sup> and the QCT. Here, I fully articulate the hypothesis of Old Ḥigāzī, an idea that I have presented in a few earlier works, and outline a scenario for the emergence of standard Classical Arabic as the literary language of the late 8<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

---

<sup>20</sup>Blau, *Handbook*.

<sup>21</sup>Blau, *Emergence*, pp. 123–32.