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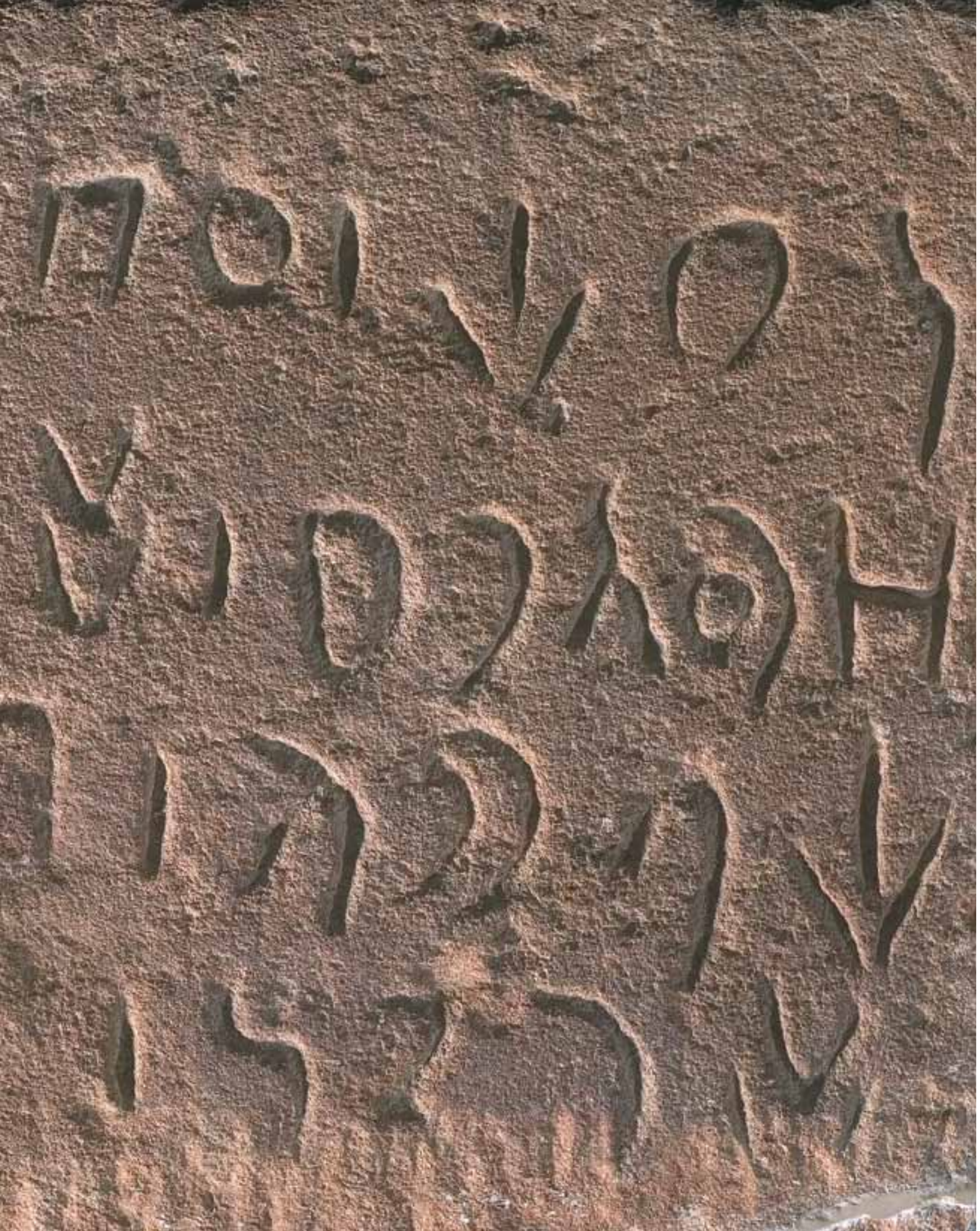
The Birth of Arabic in Stone

Robert Hoyland



(*page 50*) View of ʿAyn ʿAbada/ʿEn ʿAvdat in the Negev desert of southern Palestine. (Detail of pl. 50.)

(*page 51*) Obverse of a gold *dinar*. (See pl. 62.)

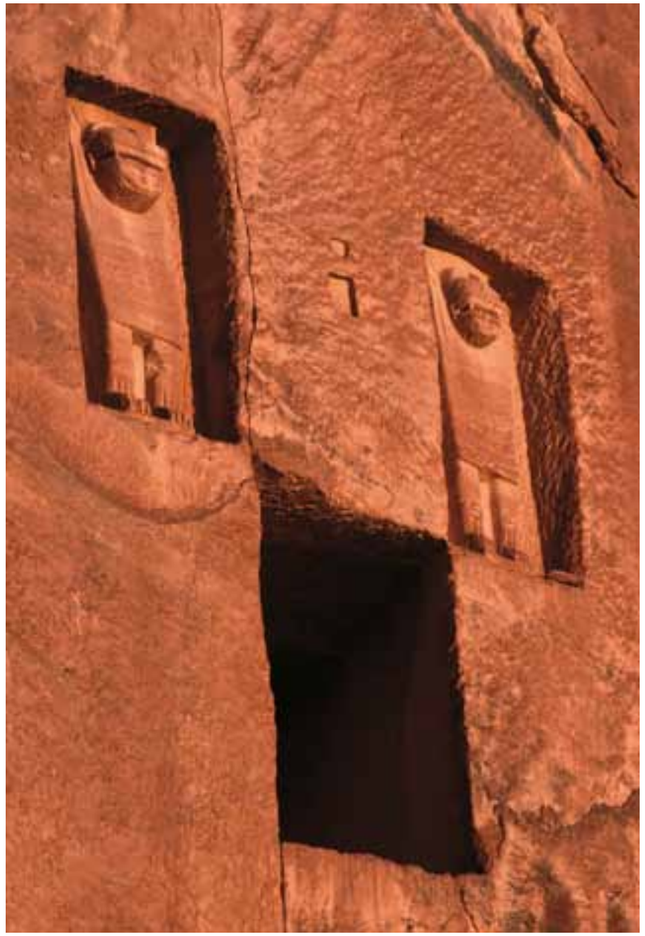
44 (*facing page*) An inscription removed from a tomb at Dedan. (Detail of pl. 45.)

The title of this essay could be understood as referring to either the Arabic script or the Arabic language, and to some extent I shall be dealing with both; but the reader should bear in mind that the two phenomena, though closely related, are not one and the same. In particular, the Arabic language was in existence long before the emergence of the script that we call Arabic. The language was presumably found in many different dialects, used by different groups scattered about the Arabian and Syrian deserts. On the rare occasions that someone wrote a text in Arabic before the rise of Islam, the script of prestige in the locality concerned was employed. Thus at Dedan (modern al-Ula) in northwest Saudi Arabia, before the Nabateans arrived there in the late first century BCE, an inscription was carved advertising "the funerary monument of ʿAbdsamin son of Zaydharim which Salma daughter of ʿAs Arsan built (ʾlt bnh Slmh bnt ʿs ʾrsn)" (JS Lih 384; pls. 45 and 46).[1] The language is Arabic, but the script is the local one peculiar to Dedan. From northern Jordan we have an example of Arabic written in Greek letters (pl. 47; al-Jallad with al-Manaser 2015, 52–59). We can only guess why its author eschewed the Ancient North Arabian script that was commonly deployed in the desert margins of Jordan and southern Syria and decided, instead, to write his message using the Greek alphabet. Perhaps he had spent time working in a nearby city where he had picked up some knowledge of Greek letters and now wanted to show off to his kinsmen. In any case, the content accords well with the tens of thousands of graffiti in Ancient North Arabian that litter this region and deal with the continual search for fresh grazing grounds. We also do not really know why the authors of these two texts chose to write in the Arabic language rather than in one of the north Arabian dialects that were the usual medium of expression in their homelands.

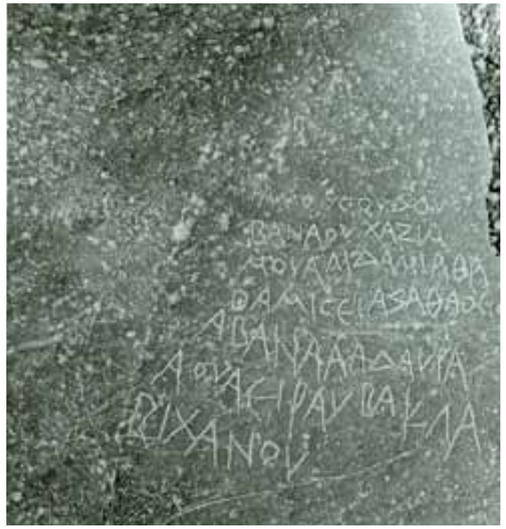
Nabatean Script

The script most frequently used for writing Arabic in these early days seems to have been the Nabatean Aramaic script. The earliest dated text of this type that we know of is a funerary inscription from Hegra (modern Madaʾin Salih, also in northwest Saudi Arabia), dated to 267 CE (pl. 48). It is composed principally in Arabic, but with some Aramaicisms, either because they were a feature of the Arabic of that region or because they were inserted to make the text look more highbrow. Most of the texts in this category come from northwest Saudi Arabia, but there are a couple that come from further north. The more famous of the two was discovered at Namara in the basalt desert southeast of Damascus; it is an epitaph, dated 328 CE, for Marʾ al-Qays, the self-styled "king of all the Arabs," celebrating his achievements (pl. 49). The second, found on a stone at ʿAyn ʿAbada/ʿEn ʿAvdat in the Negev desert of southern Palestine (pl. 50), concerns the offering of a certain Garmallahi son of Taymallahi to the god Obodas. The author records the dedication in Aramaic, but then gives two lines of Arabic verse in praise of Obodas (though still in the Nabatean Aramaic script), which may have been part of a liturgy used in the worship of the god.

45 (*right*) An inscription removed from a tomb at Dedan, before 1st century BCE; the language is Arabic but the script is the local one. Brussels, Musée du Cinquantenaire, cat. 602, O.715.



46 (*left*) Entrance to one of the rock-cut tombs at Dedan (now al-Ula) in northwest Saudi Arabia, with lion carvings over the opening.

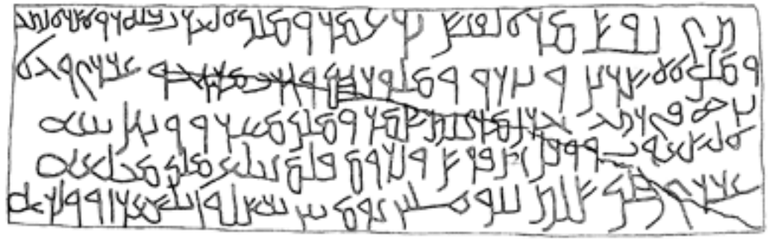


47 (*above*) Arabic graffito, written in Greek letters, at Wadi Salma in northeastern Jordan, *c.*4th century CE; al-Jallad 2015.

48 View of the landscape around Hegra (modern Mada'in Salih) in northwest Saudi Arabia, site of the earliest known Arabic inscription, dated 267 CE.

In recent years epigraphic surveys in western Saudi Arabia have brought to light a number of graffiti that provide clear examples of the Nabatean Aramaic script in transition toward what we would think of as the Arabic script (Nehmé 2010). In particular, these transitional texts often manifest a clear horizontal lower line upon which the letters rest and by which they are connected. This change in alignment – that is, the maintaining of a horizontal lower line under individual letters – is responsible for some of the developments that led to the rise of a distinctive Arabic script out of the earlier Nabatean script (pl. 51). For example, the classical Nabatean *sin* or *shin*, an upright stroke with two crossbars (*nefesh*, pl. 49b, line 1), becomes, when aligned horizontally, the classical Arabic *sin*/*shin* , a horizontal stroke with three teeth (the names Saʿdu and Is, also the final *slm*, pl. 52). The classical Nabatean *ʿayn*, a stroke at 45 degrees to the vertical with a crossbar or hook at right angles to it (ʿAmr, pl. 49b, line 1), becomes lowered almost to the horizontal, making it pretty much a standard classical Arabic *ʿayn* (*ʿabd*, pl. 52, line 2; the names ʿUbayd and ʿAmr, pl. 53). And the classical Nabatean final *ya*, which is quite upright (as in the first word of line 1 in pl. 49b), becomes lowered so that its tail starts to curve under the horizontal line of the letters (as in *bly*, in the first word of line 1 in pl. 53). Medial *het*, which had been slightly erratic in form, begins to become aligned in the center of the lower line and to take the form of the square figure-eight-like *het* (the so-called "eye of the cat," *ʿayn al-hirr*) of Arabic inscriptions from the early Islamic period (compare the *het* in the last word of line 2 in pl. 53, to the *het* of Zuhayr in pl. 60). These developments are subtle, but together they amount to a distinctive new script.

49a and b (*above and right*) An Arabic epitaph (and its transcription), written in Nabatean Aramaic script on the lintel of a funerary monument for Mar' al-Qays, the self-styled "king of all the Arabs," at Namara, near Damascus, dated 328 CE. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. MAO 4083.



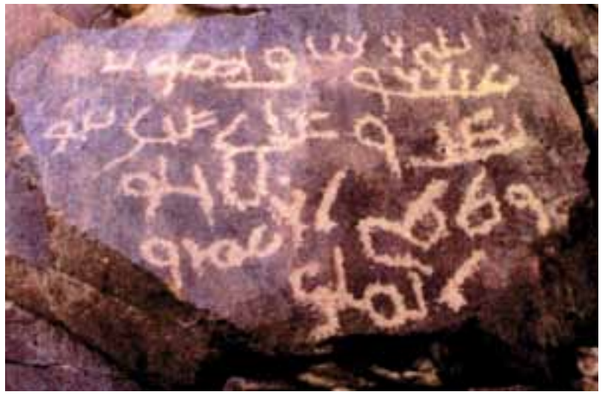
50 View of ʿAyn ʿAbada/ʾEn ʿAvedat in the Negev desert of southern Palestine, site of an inscription in Nabatean Aramaic script.

Phonetic value	Nabataean form	Evolved form	Arabic form (KUFIC)
ʾ (HAMZA/ALIPH)			
G (J)			
š (SH)			
T		ـت OR ـط	
ʿ (ʿAYN)			
R			
H (MEDIAL)			
H (FINAL)		ـه OR ـة	
Y		ـي (MEDIAL) ـي (FINAL)	ـيـ (MEDIAL) ـي (FINAL)
M			

51 The evolution of Nabatean Aramaic script toward Arabic script.

52 (*below left*) Rock graffito of Saʿdu, son of ʿAbd Is, at Umm Jadhayidh, west of Tayma, in northwest Saudi Arabia, written in evolved Nabatean Aramaic script, 4th–5th centuries CE.

53 (*below right*) Rock graffito of Fahmu, son of ʿUbayd, at Umm Jadhayidh, written in evolved Nabataean Aramaic script, the latest known dated text written in this style, 455 CE.



The date of these transitional texts is somewhat vague. Approximately twenty are dated, and these fall in the range 204–455 CE (assuming that the year numbers they cite are to be taken as referring to the era of Arabia, which began in 105 CE, when the Romans annexed the Nabatean kingdom). The last dated one that we know of is that in pl. 53, which says it was written in the year 350, corresponding in the era of Arabia to 455 CE (Nehmé 2009, 50–52).

Another tricky question is: What language are these texts written in? Most of them – and this is true also of the some six thousand published Nabatean Aramaic

graffiti – consist, aside from the owner's name, of only one of three words: *slm* ("may N be greeted"), *dkyr* ("may N be remembered"), and *bryk* ("may N be blessed"), with the occasional addition of *b-tb* ("in wellness") and *bly* (assumed to be an expression of affirmation akin to classical Arabic *bala*, "yes," "certainly"). Aside from the fact that all these words are also Arabic roots, the frequency with which they occur means that they must have effectively become ideograms, symbols expressive of a particular notion, so losing their identity as distinctive Aramaic words.

I shall illustrate this ambiguity by means of two examples, both found near Ayla (modern Eilat/Aqaba) in southern Palestine. The first is a graffito etched into the plaster of a wall at the temple of Allat in Iram (modern Ramm), some 30 km east of Ayla (pl. 54), which was found in the course of excavations at that site (Savignac and Horsfield 1935, 270). It has been placed by many scholars on the pre-Islamic Arabic list and is famous for being, in the words of Beatrice Gruendler, "the oldest inscription in Arabic language and characters" (1993, 13). But now that we know much more about the different forms of Nabatean letters, we can see that it is written in the Nabatean Aramaic script (even if "evolved" or non-classical). A clear reading of the first graffito was hampered by the tendency of scholars to regard the curved groove at the end of the word on line 1 as a part of that word, and to see its second letter as an *l* rather than an "evolved" *t*. This resulted in a number of rather bizarre readings, such as *klys* ("plasterer"; Grimme 1936) and *klnd* ("a great number of coin"; Bellamy 1988). The curved groove should be seen, however, as either part of the neighboring Thamudic text or an extraneous mark, and if we bear in mind that these sorts of text tend to be quite formulaic, rarely involving creative expressions, we shall quickly realize that the text consists of two simple graffiti, which can be read as:

1 . . . [son?] of ʿAliyyu wrote [this] / with his own hand in Iram
2 Habibu son of . . . in peace and wellbeing[.]

The *t* of *kataba* ("he wrote") is in the evolved form, whereas the classical form of the Nabatean *t* is like the Greek letter Π, with its evolved form represented by a single inclining vertical stroke. The phrase "his own hand wrote" (*ktb ydh*) could be either Arabic or Aramaic – only if short vowels were present could we determine which language it is – but the fact that it is commonly found at the end of Aramaic papyrus documents, meaning "he signed it," tips the balance of probability in favor of Aramaic (Hoyland 2010).

My second example comes from the very south of the Negev desert, about 8 km northwest of Ayla (pl. 55). As for the script, certain of the letters, especially the *ʿayn* and *ya*, as well as the maintenance of a straight baseline mean that it is well on its way to becoming Arabic, but it still has a way to go (note, for example, the horizontal *aliph* and the sublinear *kaf*). As for the language, the name and the definite article *al-* may make one rush to claim it as Arabic, but the names, though known in Arabic, are found also in Aramaic, and the definite article alone is not really sufficient to determine the language of the text (al-Jallad 2014). The form of the subject pronoun used here is found in both Arabic and Aramaic, but better attested in the latter, in particular in

54 (*above left*) Graffito etched into the plaster wall at the temple of Allat in Iram (now Ramm), Jordan, written in evolved Nabatean Aramaic script, 3rd–5th centuries CE. Reproduced from Grimme 1936.

55 (*above right*) Graffito of ʿAdiyu, son of Thaʿlaba "the king," found in the southern Negev desert, near Ayla (Eilat/Aqaba), written in evolved Nabatean Aramaic script, 5th century CE.

papyri found at the south end of the Dead Sea, only a short distance away from the location of our inscription. So although it could be in Arabic, we do not have enough information to make a firm judgment (Avner et al. 2013).

The Rise of Arabic Script

By the late fifth century and through the sixth century CE, we begin to encounter texts written in what we would recognize as the Arabic script. So far, they have been found in two different regions: southwest Saudi Arabia and Syria. The former group, comprising twelve texts, is from the vicinity of Najran, an important south Arabian town that had a substantial Christian population by the turn of the sixth century (pl. 56). They were discovered only very recently and so have not been much studied yet (Robin 2014).[2] Those from Syria, though numbering only three, have been known for decades and so have attracted much more attention. One, from Zabad, southeast of Aleppo, dated 512 CE, is a short Arabic addition to a Greek–Aramaic bilingual text inscribed on the lintel of a martyrium dedicated to St. Sergius (pl. 57). One, from Jabal Says, about 100 km southeast of Damascus, dated 528 CE, is a rock graffito by a certain Ruqaym ibn al-Muʿarrif, recording his despatch by "al-Harith the King" (almost certainly a chief of Ghassan, Rome's most important tribal ally in the east) to guard this important watering hole and waystation on the route from Bosra to Palmyra (pl. 59). And one is situated in the Syrian village of Harran, south of Damascus, dated 568 CE (pl. 58). It is a bilingual Greek–Arabic inscription – the first time Arabic appears in a monumental context – recording the building of a martyrium for a certain St. John by one Sharahil son of Talimu (in Greek, Saraelos Talemou), evidently an important man in the local Christian community.

This evolution of the Arabic script from the Nabatean script presumes frequent and sustained writing of Arabic in the Nabatean script, prompting writers to introduce changes to make their task easier and their texts less ambiguous. Such a development is not likely to have occurred as a result of writing only a handful of texts, so it is very probable that there were many such inscriptions, and almost certainly documents as well, since changes in script tend to occur principally on soft media, on which pens may run free, rather than on hard media like stone, which severely constrain would-be

56 (*top left*) Arabic inscription on a rock face at Hima, north of Najran, in southwest Saudi Arabia, dated 469 CE.

57 (*top right*) Arabic signatures added to a bilingual Greek–Aramaic text on the lintel of a martyrium dedicated to St. Sergius at Zabad, near Aleppo, dated 512 CE.

58 (*above*) Lintel of a martyrium at Harran, southern Syria, inscribed with a bilingual text in Greek and Arabic, dated 568 CE; it is the first known appearance of Arabic in a monumental context.

writers. What, then, prompted this increase in the production of Arabic texts? There are two major contenders.

The first is the emergence of Arab client kingdoms. Many pre-Islamic Arabic texts mention kings: for example, the text from Namara names Marʾ al-Qays son of ʿAmr; one from Ayla mentions ʿAdiyu son of Thaʿlaba; and the text from Jabal Says refers to al-Harith the King. The Harran text was commissioned by a tribal leader known as a phylarch (noted in the Greek part of the text). Such characters were in receipt of a measure of power and resources from one of the two superpowers of the day, Rome and Persia, in return for allegiance and providing military service (Edwell 2015). Those most closely involved in the imperial power structure, such as the Ghassanids, enjoyed a considerable degree of support from their Roman masters, the aim being to counter the Arab allies of the Romans' archrival, the Persians, as is made very clear by the sixth-century historian Procopius:

> Mundhir, holding the position of king, ruled alone over all the Saracens in Persia, and he was always able to make his inroad with the whole army wherever he wished in the Roman domain. Neither any commander of Roman troops nor any leader of the Saracens allied with the Romans was strong enough with his men to

59 View of Jabal Says, a site southeast of Damascus, known for its Arabic graffito by a soldier, recording his posting there by "King Harith," dated 528 CE.

> array himself against Mundhir. For this reason the emperor Justinian (527–65) put in command of as many clans as possible al-Harith the son of Jabala, who ruled over the Saracens of Arabia, and bestowed upon him the dignity of king (*basileus*), a thing which among the Romans had never been done before. (Procopius 1914/1961, 1.17)

Imperial support also gave these chiefs power at a local level, as is shown most dramatically in a number of texts that date events by the time in office of local leaders rather than of the emperor or the provincial governor. There are many accounts that relate, in a somewhat legendary fashion, how such chiefs spent their subsidies in imitating their imperial overlords, establishing luxurious courts, and offering patronage to

artists, a practice with a long history among imperial vassal states. Yet, allowing for some exaggeration, it is very plausible that such rulers established some sort of political and administrative structure and that they patronized a degree of learning. This could help to explain the rise of an Arabic script in the sixth century.

All of these pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions have a connection with Christianity. That from Jabal Says reflects the command of a Christian Arab king; those from Zabad and Harran are etched on church lintels; and the Najran texts are mostly accompanied by crosses and seem to belong to a local Christian community. And this connection is a strong argument in favor of the second contender for the main impetus behind the development of the Arabic script: the spread of Christianity and the activity of Christian missionaries. In the fourth century the Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, and Palestinian Aramaic languages also began to be written down for the first time (Palestinian Aramaic in a modified Estrangelo Aramaic script, comparable to the modified Nabatean Aramaic script used to write down Arabic). This was done so that the key Christian texts could be preached in the vernacular to the masses, most of whom would not have known a high language such as Greek. Could this motive also explain the emergence of the Arabic script? Unfortunately, whereas we have many Bible translations and hagiographies in Coptic, Armenian, and Palestinian Aramaic to illustrate this point, we have no such evidence for Arabic. Nevertheless, there are some factors that support this argument.

First, we do have numerous accounts of Christian missionary work among the Arab tribes – in particular, tales of the virtuous lives and miraculous deeds of Christian clergy and holy men who won the hearts of many a pagan Arab (Fisher and Wood 2015). A good example is provided by the activities of the bishop Ahudemmeh in the late sixth century:

> The holy Ahudemmeh set himself with great patience to visit all the camps of the Arabs, instructing and teaching them in many sermons . . . He had priests come from many regions . . . in order to establish in every tribe a priest and a deacon. He founded churches and named them after tribal chiefs so that they would support them . . . Thus he inclined the hearts of the Arabs to the love of God and particularly to giving to the needy (Fisher and Wood 2015, 353)

Second, it was particularly Syriac Christian church authorities who were involved with an emergent Arab Christianity. For example, in the early fifth century, Alexander, bishop of Mabbug (modern Manbij, northeast of Aleppo), built a church at Rusafa dedicated to St. Sergius, to whom the Arab tribes of that region were much devoted, and Syriac Christian writers composed a number of texts to celebrate the life of this saint. This involvement also holds good for Christianity in Arabia. Philoxenus, bishop of Mabbug, consecrated the first two bishops of Najran in southwest Arabia in the early sixth century; the south Arabian martyr Elias had been a monk at the convent of Mar Abraham of Tella, east of Edessa (modern Urfa/Şanlıurfa in southeast Turkey), and had been ordained a priest by John, bishop of Tella; and both Jacob of Serug and John the Psalter from the monastery of Aphtonia at Qenneshre (east of Aleppo) penned

works in honor of the Christians martyred at Najran in the 520s. Thus, Syriac Christian lines of communication stretched from Syria to Yemen, and this could have provided the conduit and impetus for the circulation of Arabic writing between these two regions, nicely illustrated by the Arabic inscriptions from the areas around Najran, Damascus, and Aleppo.

Finally, the Qurʾan's intimate familiarity with stories and characters from the Old and New Testaments, and the fact that it can just simply allude to them without having to give any explanation, suggests that either the whole Bible or at least extracts from it already existed in Arabic and that this material was quite familiar to the Qurʾan's audience. A simple example is provided by the story of how Mary, mother of Jesus, was given sustenance by a palm tree:

> Qurʾan 19: 24: فَنَادَاهَا مِنْ تَحْتِهَا أَلَّا تَحْزَنِي قَدْ جَعَلَ رَبُّكِ تَحْتَكِ سَرِيًّا
>
> He [the new-born Jesus] called to her [Mary] from below her (*min tahtiha*): "Do not be sad, your Lord has put below you a rivulet" (*sariyan*).

Although the mention of a rivulet is not immediately comprehensible here, the Qurʾan is clearly influenced by the tale in the Christian tradition of how Mary, tired on the journey to Egypt, seeks rest under a palm tree, whereupon Jesus, "looking up from his mother's bosom," calls upon the palm tree to lower its fruit-bearing branches and let a stream come out from under it; thus, Mary is able to eat and drink (Mourad 2008, 167–69).

Both of these phenomena – the emergence of Arab client kings and the spread of Christianity among Arabophone peoples – interlink, so there is no need to try to determine which one is more likely. A good example of this interlinking is provided by the career of Abu Karib son of Jabala, brother of the better-known Ghassanid king al-Harith ibn Jabala, who, as we saw earlier, was appointed in the 540s by the emperor Justinian to be in charge of all the Arab allies of the Roman Empire. A sixth-century Syriac manuscript from a monastery near Palmyra was copied, so it asserts, when Abu Karib was king, a reference to the fact that in the 530s Justinian had entrusted him with providing backup to the governor of the southern portion of Roman Arabia (corresponding to modern south Jordan and northwest Saudi Arabia). In this capacity, he sent a diplomatic envoy to Abraha, king of Himyar, in 558. As we know from a number of literary and epigraphic texts, the Ghassanid elite were Christians, and so both the factors I propose as underlying the emergence of the Arabic script come together in the person of Abu Karib (Millar 2013). It is because he was both a local powerbroker and a Christian that he could act as arbitrator in a dispute between two church deacons at Petra concerning the sale of a vineyard, as is recorded in one of the papyri that was miraculously preserved at Petra. The papyrus says that the documents concerning this sale were drawn up in Greek and a second language: very unfortunately for us, there is a hole in the papyrus at this point, but it is very likely that it said "Arabic," since we have evidence that Arabic was spoken in Petra at this time (al-Jallad et al. 2013).

We witness, then, the gradual rise in the importance of the Arabic language through the sixth century. In 568 Sharahil ibn Zalim established the church of St. John to the south of Damascus and emblazoned above its doorway the first ever monumental Arabic inscription, taking its place proudly alongside Greek. Only a short while later, the Prophet Muhammad received revelations in Arabic, the first time that it had been used for this purpose. God could have revealed them in a language that had traditionally been used for revelation, what the Qurʾan calls the *aʿjami* tongue (perhaps meaning Aramaic), and there were apparently some – designated *al-aʿjamin* (Q 26: 198) – who called for this (Q 41: 44). It is implied, however, that this would not have facilitated the clear exposition of the Qurʾan's message, and so God made the revelations in the "Arab(ic) language" (*lisanun ʿarabiyun*; Q 16: 103, Q 26: 195, Q 46: 12) "as an Arab(ic) recitation" (*Qurʾanan ʿarabiyan*; Q 12: 2, Q 20: 113, Q 39: 28, Q 41: 3, Q 42: 7, Q 43: 3). Evidently Arabic's time had come.

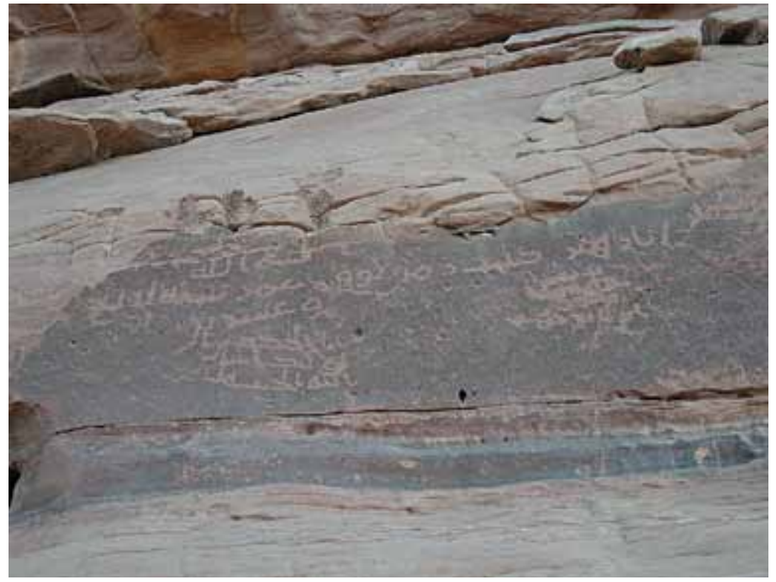
There is one other possible factor that lay behind Arabic's rise in status, and that is the corresponding rise in status of the province of Arabia. It began its life in 105 CE when the Romans annexed the Nabatean kingdom, a sprawling region that stretched from Damascus in the north to west central Arabia in the south, and from Gaza in the west to the expanses of the Syrian and Arabian deserts in the east. The military and administrative power of the Roman Empire, followed later by the organizing and unifying force of Christianity, brought greater integration and cultural coherence to the province. This allowed the empire to project its influence beyond its notional borders, as is illustrated by the fact that the era of Arabia (that is, the era beginning with the inauguration of the province in 105 CE, a common means of dating for the inhabitants of a region or city of the Roman Empire) was employed far beyond the borders of the province. Indeed, it appears to be used in two of the aforementioned Najran inscriptions, which claim to be written "in the year 364" and "in the year 408"; only the era of Arabia offers us a timeframe into which these texts could plausibly fit (adding 105 gives us 469 and 513 CE). It is likely, also, that Arabic, which had been one of the languages of the Nabatean kingdom, benefited from the enhanced prestige of the province, becoming eventually an accepted language of the empire, a change witnessed in concrete form in the Jabal Says and Harran inscriptions (Bowersock 1983; Hoyland 2009, 129–32).

The Flowering of Arabic Writing in the Seventh Century

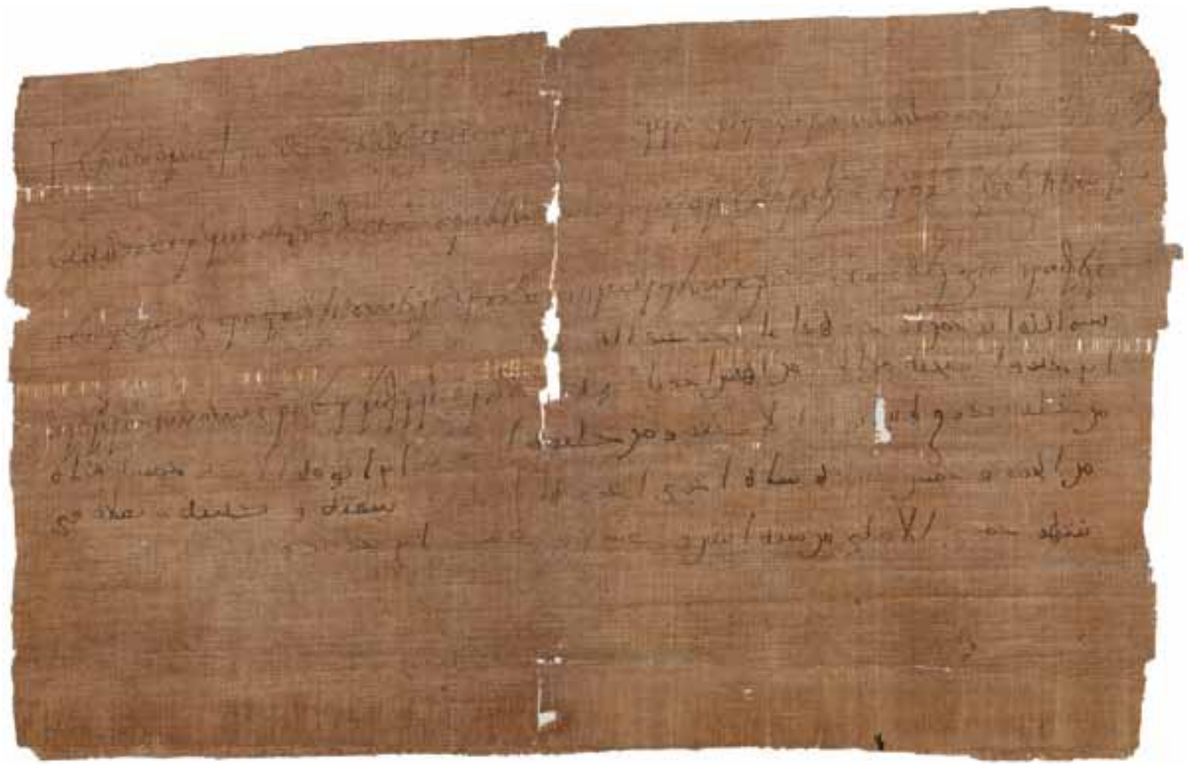
The first shoots of Arabic writing became visible in the sixth century, but it was in the seventh century that it really blossomed. The Arab conquests, which brought the area from the Pyrenees to the western edges of modern-day India under Arab rule, dramatically improved the fortunes of Arabic, making it, over time, the language of prestige in all this area. Yet Arabic's fortunes were not instantly transformed. The bureaucracies of the former Persian Empire and the former eastern provinces of the Roman Empire continued to function in Persian and Greek respectively at least until the end

of the seventh century. The are relatively few documents in Arabic datable to before 690; on stone there are only a handful of graffiti, almost all of these from west Arabia, beginning in 24/642 (pl. 60). Of monumental inscriptions in Arabic, there is none worthy of the name; the only exception is the dam inscriptions of Muʿawiya in the Hijaz, but these are so simple – just carved onto unhewn rock faces – that they barely qualify as "monumental."

This oddity has been noted most recently by writers on the emergence of old Arabic, who observe that whereas Arabic texts are found in Syria in the sixth century "the earliest seventh-century examples are found back in Arabia" (Fiema et al. 2015, 410). But it has also been remarked upon by those who puzzle over the paucity of Arabic documents from the first decades of Arab rule (Johns 2003). Is this a real phenomenon or just an accident of survival? The harsh climate, enormous size, and low population of Saudi Arabia mean that humans have exploited relatively little of its surface area, and so the survival rate of rock graffiti is good. Moreover, the west of Saudi Arabia has a continuous mountain range of just the right sort of rock for carving. In the settled Middle East, however, exploitation of the land has been high, and many areas lack the right sort of rock for carving. A tombstone from Egypt dated 31/652, a graffito from Iraq dated 65/685, and a moderate number of Arabic papyri from Egypt and southern Palestine, beginning as early as the 20s/640s (pl. 61) tell us that Arabic was already in use across the Middle East. Yet it is true that there is a certain reticence in its use, and it may be that the new Arab rulers, faced with the ancient cultures of the



60 Arabic graffito of Zuhayr on a rock face near Hegra (modern Madaʾin Salih) in northwest Saudi Arabia, dated 644 CE.



61 (*above*) Bilingual Greek–Arabic papyrus from Egypt, bearing a demand from an Arab general for supplies from the local population, dated 643 CE. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, PERF 558.

62 (*facing page left*) Obverse of a gold *dinar*, minted at Damascus in 696–97, showing the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik ("The Standing Caliph") surrounded by an Arabic inscription reading, "In the name of God, there is no deity but God alone, Muhammad is the messenger of God." Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, NCR 4812.

Fertile Crescent and Egypt, initially resorted to the languages of the indigenous peoples rather than their own, which was a relative parvenu.

In any case the situation changed dramatically with the accession of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik in 685. He saw at first hand the terrible destruction and loss of life wrought by the decade-long second Arab civil war (683–92), and he realized that if the young Muslim state were to survive, he would have to bring a degree of uniformity to its territories. He decided to implement at once the establishment of a single coinage across his realm, replacing the imitations of Byzantine and Persian coins that had been in circulation until this time with a distinctively Islamic issue (pl. 62). In addition, he decreed that Arabic should be used for all official purposes, thereby ousting Greek, Aramaic, and Persian from the position that they had occupied for many centuries. If Arabic was now to be used as an imperial language, it needed to look the part, and it is from this time – the 690s – that we see the deployment of a more polished form of Arabic script. Often called the imperial Umayyad style, this is characterized by slender ascending letters in strict mathematical proportion to the non-ascending ones (pl. 63).

Like Greek and Aramaic before it, Arabic was now a language of empire, and, like them, it was also a language of revelation. Many of those who converted to Islam were eager to master Arabic – the language of the Qurʾan and the language of the Prophet

63 (*above right*) Arabic inscription containing a Qurʾanic verse (Q 38: 26) on a rock face near Mecca, dated 699–700 CE; the careful proportion between ascending and non-ascending letters is noteworthy.

Muhammad – in order the better to comprehend their faith. Thus, the first biography of Muhammad was by Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), the grandson of a prisoner-of-war from ʿAyn al-Tamr in Iraq; the earliest surviving Qurʾanic commentary was by Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767), born of Persian parents; and the first Arabic grammar was by Sibawayhi (d. 796), a native of Balkh in modern Afghanistan. And on their tombstones, Muslims from many different backgrounds proclaimed allegiance to their faith and adherence to its principles in the Arabic language.

NOTES

1 Full bibliography for all the inscriptions that are discussed in this chapter, except for pls. 47, 54, and 56 (which have only recently been discovered), is provided in Macdonald 2008, 468–71 and Fiema et al. 2015.

2 They do demonstrate that the observation that "in the fourth and fifth centuries the development [of Arabic script] is found in northwest Arabia, while in the sixth century all the examples are found in Syria" (Fiema et al. 2015, 410) is incorrect. Southwest Arabia now needs to be brought into the picture.