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Ancient Arabia and the written word

M.C.A. MACDONALD

Summary

From at least the early first millennium BC, the western two-thirds of Arabia saw the flowering of a large number of literate cultures in both the north and the south, using a family of alphabets unique to Arabia. This happened not only in the settled areas, but among the nomads who, however, used writing purely as a pastime. These scripts died out in the north by about the third century AD and in the south by the end of the sixth. Among the written languages used in western Arabia, Old Arabic is conspicuous by its absence and seems only to have been transcribed on very rare occasions, using a variety of scripts. The Nabataeans used Aramaic as their written language and brought their version of the Aramaic script to Arabia in the first century BC. In late antiquity, the Nabataean Aramaic script gradually ceased to be employed to write Aramaic and came to be used for Arabic, which thus at last came to be a habitually written language. However, writing appears to have been used only for notes, business documents, treaties, letters, etc., not for culturally important texts, which continued to be passed on orally well into the early Islamic period.

Keywords: literacy, writing, Arabia, Old Arabic, alphabetic scripts, nomads

In about 800 BC, the regent of the Hittite city of Carchemish set up an inscription. He was a eunuch of the palace and had been charged with ruling the city during the minority of the sons of the late king, Astiruwas (Hawkins 2000: 78).¹ The regent was called Yariris, and in his inscription he listed his achievements and skills, among which he claimed to know twelve languages and at least four scripts.² The latter were: “the script of the city”, i.e. Carchemish itself (hieroglyphic Luwian), the script of Tyre (i.e. the Phoenico-Aramaic alphabet), the script of Assyria (i.e. cuneiform), and the *ta-i-ma-ni-ti* script. The last almost certainly refers to the script used in the Arabian oasis of Taymāʾ, possibly as a representative of the alphabets of Arabia in general.³

The four scripts listed neatly symbolize a world with Carchemish at its centre, Phoenicia to the west, Assyria to the east, and Taymāʾ to the south. It also represents — though this must have been unconscious — the major types of writing system in the ancient Near East: hieroglyphic, cuneiform, and the two branches of the alphabet.

For while the *idea* of the alphabet was invented only once, probably in Egypt⁴ sometime in the second millennium BC, the original alphabet seems to have split into two traditions at an early stage, and these appear to have developed in parallel. In the Levant there was the Phoenico-Aramaic branch, from which are descended all but one of the traditional alphabets used throughout the world today. The other branch was the South Semitic script family, which was used exclusively in ancient Arabia and its immediate environs, and is today represented only by the writing system used in Ethiopia for Gəʿəz, Amharic, etc. Thus, Arabia was unique in the ancient world in having its own branch of the alphabet and some of its inhabitants used it with great enthusiasm.

However, the available evidence points to an unexplained but very marked difference between the western two-thirds of the Peninsula and the eastern one third (Macdonald 2009a III: 38–41). In the west, the writings of the ancients are everywhere to be seen and we have evidence of the use of numerous languages,

¹ This is the adapted text of the MBI Al-Jaber Foundation annual lecture given at the British Museum during the 2009 Seminar for Arabian Studies. Since it was a public lecture, attended by both experts in the subject participating in the Seminar and members of the public who came to it with no previous experience, it inevitably contains information that is well known to some but new to others. It was intended as an introduction to the Seminar for Arabian Studies’ Special Session on *The development of Arabic as a written language*, of which this volume is the publication, and my brief paper in that Session has been incorporated into this one.

² Hawkins 2000: 131, Inscription II.24 Karkamiš A15b, ll. 19–20. The beginning of the list of scripts in l. 19 is lost, so there may have been more than four.

³ See the discussions in Hawkins 2000: 133, note on l. 19; and more recently in Macdonald 2009a, Addenda: 15–16.

⁴ See recently Sass 2008 and references there.



FIGURE 1. A map of the ancient Near East showing the places and the rough east–west division mentioned in this paper. (By kind permission of Equinox Publishing Ltd).

dialects, and scripts. By contrast, in the eastern third of the Peninsula, evidence of writing is extremely rare. Moreover, whereas in the west, several settled areas developed their own forms of the script and the nomads developed several others, in the east we know so far of only one indigenous script, that of undated and undeciphered dipinti and graffiti in Dhofar, southern Oman (al-Shahri 1991; 1994). All the other inscriptions in eastern Arabia — and there are

fewer than 180 in all — are in imported scripts: Akkadian cuneiform, Aramaic, Greek, and Ancient South Arabian (see below). We do not know the reasons for this curious difference between the two sides of the Peninsula: whether it represents a difference in the levels or uses of literacy in the two regions in antiquity, or simply the marked disparity in the availability of durable writing materials.

* * *

As I hope to have shown elsewhere (Macdonald 2009a I), a society can be literate, in the sense that its political, administrative, religious, and sometimes commercial functions rely on writing, even when the majority of the population is unable to read or write. This was the case in mediaeval Europe for instance. On the other hand, there are some societies in which word of mouth and memory perform all the functions of communication and record for which we use writing. I would call such societies and their members “non-literate”, and reserve the term “illiterate” for those who cannot read and/or write within a literate society (2009a I: 49–50). Just as there are often many illiterates in literate societies there can also be many people who can read or write in a non-literate society, without it affecting their continued use of memory and oral communication in their daily lives. The Tuareg nomads of north-west Africa are an excellent modern example of this. They speak Berber dialects and live in non-literate societies which function on memory and oral communication, and yet they have their own writing system, the Tifinagh, which they use purely for amusement: playing games, carving graffiti, writing coded love letters, etc. If they need to write for practical purposes, they will employ a scribe (or find a relative who has been to school) to write in Arabic or French, even if they are writing to another Tuareg who will then have to ask someone else to read the letter and translate it for him. The Tuareg have an extremely rich oral literature in which writing, even in their own script, plays no part. Culture is quintessentially oral;⁵ writing in their own script is for fun; and for practical, non-cultural, activities they use writing by proxy in a foreign language and script. A very similar situation seems to have existed in ancient Arabia, and it is worth bearing this in mind as we approach the many and varied uses of literacy there.

* * *

The best-known examples of literate societies in the Peninsula are the kingdoms of ancient South Arabia. The Ancient South Arabian alphabet is known in two different forms: the *musnad* and the *zabūr*. The *musnad* was used for some 1500 years from the early first millennium BC to the sixth century AD (see Drewes *et al.* forthcoming), during which time huge numbers of public inscriptions were carved on rock faces, stelae, gravestones, and objects such as incense burners and altars, as well as being carved on, or cast in, bronze.

But what do these thousands of inscriptions tell us about the extent and nature of literacy in these kingdoms?

Carving monumental inscriptions on stone, or casting them in bronze, is very skilled work, so the nominal “authors” of these inscriptions would actually have *commissioned* them, and need not themselves have been able to write, or even able to read the finished product. Even the so-called penitential or confession inscriptions, which sometimes acknowledge very intimate sins, are formulaic in their structure and do not suggest at all that they contain the penitent’s own words. It seems virtually certain that the text of these inscriptions would have been composed and written out by a temple scribe and then transferred to stone by the mason. In other inscriptions, such as those commemorating the construction of a building or irrigation system, celebrating the achievements of a ruler, or setting out rules and regulations, etc. the wording would have been dictated to the scribe who, once again, would have written out the text for the mason to copy. This means that in the process of creating these inscriptions, only one person — the one who is the least visible to us, i.e. the scribe — need have been able to write.

One should also remember that public inscriptions are often intended more as symbols than as channels of communication. In most cases in antiquity, if it was necessary to promulgate the text of the inscription, it was distributed on parchment or papyrus and/or was proclaimed. Moreover, in antiquity, as in the Middle Ages, silent reading was rare enough to be remarked on, and reading aloud was the norm, so it only required one literate person to read an inscription for all within earshot to get the message.⁶ For the most part, however, I suspect the inscriptions themselves remained symbols of authority or commemoration with no requirement, or even expectation, that they would be read, a conclusion that, I am happy to say, has been reached independently by Peter Stein (personal communication). I would therefore suggest that the existence of large numbers of public inscriptions is not *of itself* an indication of widespread literacy in a society, but see below.

Until forty years ago, the *musnad* was the only known form of the Ancient South Arabian alphabet. But since the early 1970s thousands of texts have come to light in another version of the script, the *zabūr*. It developed from the *musnad* early in the first millennium BC and then the two versions evolved in parallel (see Ryckmans 2001). It was used, not for public inscriptions but for everyday documents such as contracts, letters, schedules, lists, etc. These were incised on palm-leaf stalks and sticks, where the outer skin or bark was peeled off when they

⁵ See the brilliant study by Galand-Pernet (1998).

⁶ For a more detailed discussion see Macdonald 2009a I: 99, and n. 61.

were freshly cut, revealing a relatively soft surface on which texts could be incised with a sharp blade. However, it should be borne in mind that, with the exception of twenty-two examples from the site of Raybūn in Ḥaḍramawt (Frantsouzoff 1999), all the sticks known so far appear to come from a single site — a huge archive which must have been used over a period of 1500 years near the ancient town of Nashshān (modern al-Sawdāʾ), in northern Yemen (Stein 2005a: 184).

Who used the *zabūr*? One might assume that the thousands of sticks that have survived imply widespread literacy. However, there are a number of factors which may suggest that this was not so. For instance, in the correspondence carved on these sticks, while the recipient is addressed as “you”, the sender appears as “he” or “she”, rather than “I”, which suggests that an intermediary, such as a scribe, was actually *writing* the letter. Indeed, after a meticulous study of these documents over many years, Peter Stein has suggested that when someone in ancient South Arabia wanted something written, he or she would go to a scribal centre (with its archive), where the document would be written for them, and possibly a copy retained (Stein 2005b: 148–150). So even the existence of a large number of informal and personal documents does not necessarily indicate widespread literacy.

However, there is one class of texts, which strongly suggests that literacy was more widespread in ancient South Arabia, than would appear from the above. For, as well as thousands of public inscriptions and documents on sticks, there is an abundance of graffiti. These are found all over what is now Yemen and in the deserts to the north, between Najrān and Qaryat al-Fāw (Fig. 1). As one would expect, they are carved in the *musnad*, i.e. the script of public inscriptions, rather than the *zabūr*, since in most cultures in which there are formal and informal versions of the script, graffiti tend to be in the formal version, like public inscriptions. Thus, in the Greek, Roman, and Cyrillic alphabets, capital letters are normally used for graffiti (even those in spray paint),⁷ and I would suggest that this is why unpointed angular Kufic was used for several centuries in Arabic graffiti even though it was hardly, if ever, used in everyday documents.

⁷ Robert Hoyland has pointed out to me (personal communication) that young children have traditionally used capitals in writing birthday cards or labelling their drawings and that this is presumably not out of a desire for formality. However, I would suggest that they do so simply because they were taught the capital letters first and only later the lower-case forms. As teaching methods have changed I have noticed that cards and notes from some young children now tend to be all in lower case, with no capitals.

Now, most people, even if they are literate, get little chance to write the version of the script used for inscriptions in their society. There is no exact equivalent in the West because we use both capitals and lower-case letters in our daily writing and so have no formal version of the script, although inscriptions and graffiti tend to be only in capitals. However, most of us, for instance, have a reading knowledge of the letter forms of typefaces, but very few of us have any practice in reproducing them by hand, although if we have a relatively good visual memory we could make a reasonably successful attempt. The same would be true of people in ancient South Arabia carving graffiti in the *musnad*, which is probably why we find some attempts that are not entirely successful. There is a famous remark in Petronius’ *Satyrice* (LVIII.7) where a Roman freedman says that although he had had no formal education, *lapidarias litteras scio* “I know the letters used in inscriptions”.⁸ This gives us an insight into how reading literacy could spread informally in a society in which the majority of people use their memories a great deal more than we do, partly because they cannot use writing as a substitute. It does not take very long or an enormous effort, to learn to read an alphabetic script, particularly if one is learning only one version (for instance the capitals used in Roman inscriptions, or the *musnad* in their Ancient South Arabian equivalents). The problem comes when one tries to transfer this *reading* knowledge of the letters to writing them — or, in the case of most ancient graffiti, carving them — if one has had no training and very little practice in writing.

Graffiti are, by definition, the work of individuals and it is highly unlikely that a professional stonemason would be employed to carve a graffito for someone. What would be the point?⁹ Indeed, I would say that once an inscription is commissioned it ceases to be a graffito. There is not

⁸ On this see Macdonald 2009a I: 77, n. 91.

⁹ In the years shortly after the Safaitic script was finally deciphered in 1901, Enno Littmann, among others, suggested that the fact that most Safaitic inscriptions begin with the preposition *l* (the so-called *lām auctoris*) and were expressed in the third person singular, suggested that they were written by scribes (1904: 111; see also 1940: 98–99; 1943: viii). However, given the vast numbers of these graffiti this would have been a logistical impossibility and the idea of employing a scribe to carve a graffito is anyway incongruous. On the *lām auctoris* see Macdonald 2006: 294–295. The use of the first or third person in a graffito is surely simply dictated by the introductory formula employed. If it begins “I (am) so-and-so . . .” it is natural for it to continue in the first person. If it begins “By so-and-so . . .” (like the vast majority of Safaitic graffiti) it is natural for it to continue in the third person. This is quite different from the case of the ancient South Arabian correspondence incised in the *zabūr* on sticks, where we have the equivalent of indirect speech (“he asks you”), as explained above.

a simple dichotomy between formal (“monumental”) inscriptions and graffiti. There are plenty of other kinds of carved texts that fit into neither category (e.g. at random, *me fecit* or magic inscriptions on objects; exhortations such as “Vote for X”; *cave canem*; or announcements of entertainments, closure of public buildings, etc.).

Thus, if, as I am suggesting, a graffito is by definition carved or written in the author’s own hand, and the very large numbers of graffiti in South Arabia are in a script (i.e. the *musnad*) which would not normally have been used in day-to-day writing, this suggests that there may well have been a fairly widespread *reading* knowledge (at least) of the formal *musnad* script in the general population.

While it is clear, therefore, that the ancient South Arabian kingdoms were literate societies in the sense that they relied on the written word for important functions, we do not have sufficient evidence to know how widely even reading-literacy, let alone the ability to write, was spread throughout the population. However, I would suggest that, at least at some periods, quite considerable numbers of people in these societies must have been able to read the *musnad* script used in public inscriptions and managed to convert this reading knowledge to a writing knowledge in order to carve graffiti. We cannot deduce from this, however, that they practised writing in other circumstances. Normal life outside the palace chancellery, the temple, and probably the merchant’s office, almost certainly did not require ordinary people to write, and those who did write would presumably have used the *zabūr* in their daily life, not the *musnad*. Thus, ironically, the vast numbers of inscriptions produced in ancient South Arabia do not necessarily imply a very high degree of literacy in the population. For that we have to go north and to a very unexpected group. But first we should examine what we know of the social, commercial, and cultural situation in north and central Arabia.

* * *

Here, a different pattern emerges. In the first millennium BC, frankincense was probably the most valuable commodity on the markets of the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean world. South Arabia was the only source of good-quality frankincense, which is a resin tapped from trees of the species *Boswellia sacra* in the mountains of Dhofar. But this source in the south of the Peninsula was far away from the almost insatiable markets in the north and the frankincense had to be brought from source to market by camel caravans travelling across Arabia. This

involved the nomads of north and central Arabia who provided the camels and those who looked after them, the guides and the guards, and who no doubt charged for the privilege of crossing the territories within which they migrated. It also involved the inhabitants of the settled areas, who would not only have charged tolls, but would have sold the members of the caravan food and water for themselves and their beasts, and would no doubt have set up profitable markets for the exchange of goods. All this distributed the wealth generated by the trade over large areas of Arabia drawing huge amounts of money and goods into the Peninsula from Mesopotamia, the Near East, Egypt, and the Mediterranean. In a financial sense, frankincense was the petroleum of antiquity.

But it had other effects as well. In antiquity, the great oases of north-west Arabia were cosmopolitan trading centres with links to the great kingdoms surrounding them, and even, as we have seen, as far away as Carchemish in what is now southern Turkey. I have argued elsewhere that the merchants from the oases not only sold frankincense in these areas, but may have traded between centres in the Levant and Mesopotamia in goods bought in one place and sold in another, as well as returning to Arabia with goods purchased in the north (Macdonald 2009a IX: 339–340). A dramatic account from the mid-eighth century BC by the governor of Suḥu and Mari on the Euphrates tells how he raided a caravan of “the people of Tema and Saba whose own country is far away” just after it had visited the city of Ḥindānu, apparently on its return journey to Arabia (ibid. pp. 338–340 and references there).¹⁰ Although the list of the booty he took from it is damaged, it includes purple cloth, wool, precious stones, and iron, the latter a commodity which we know from another Assyrian document was sought after by the “Arabs” (e.g. Parpola 1987: 140, no. 179, lines 22–23), but no frankincense.

Each of the three major oases of north-west Arabia — Taymāʾ, Dedān, and Dūmah — developed its own form of the South Semitic alphabet. This in itself is interesting since they were geographically closer to areas using the Phoenico-Aramaic alphabets than they were to South Arabia, and at first sight one might have expected them to have adopted the Phoenico-Aramaic script from the Levant. On the other hand, they do not seem to have taken the alphabet from South Arabia either. Although we still do not understand the exact interrelationships of the various members of the South Semitic script family, it

¹⁰ Naʾaman assumes, on no evidence that I can discover, that the “caravan was on its way north to the territory under Assyrian rule” (2008: 234).

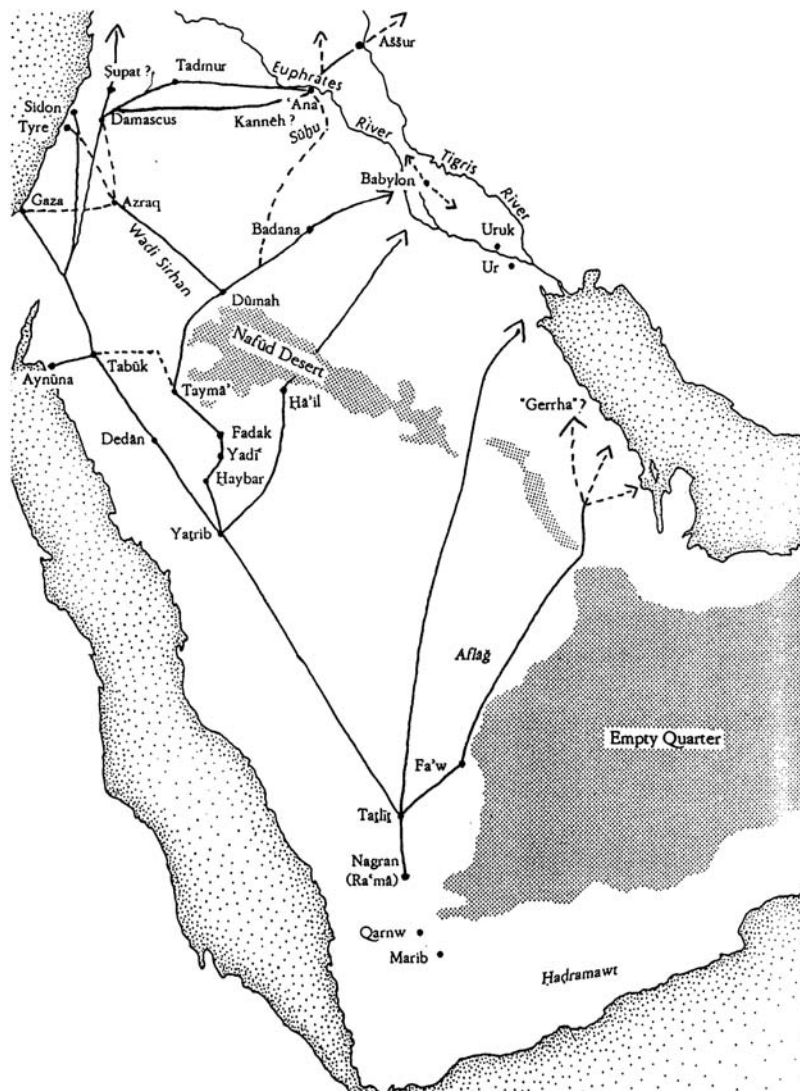


FIGURE 2. A map showing trade routes across Arabia in the first millennium BC and the early centuries AD. (From Macdonald 2009a IX: 349, by kind permission of Ashgate Publishing Ltd).

seems likely that the alphabets used in South Arabia and those used in North Arabia developed in parallel rather than one from the other.

I mentioned earlier that Yariris, the regent of Carchemish in about 800 BC claimed to be able to read the alphabet of Taymā'. There are several hundred inscriptions and graffiti in this script scattered around the oasis and its environs, and although none found so far mentions Carchemish, they tell us, among other things, of wars with Dedān, the great rival oasis that dominated the other major west Arabian caravan route to the north

(Fig. 2 and Macdonald 2009a IX: 334–336). The heavy involvement of the oases and nomads of North Arabia in the frankincense trade encouraged the Assyrians to try repeatedly but unsuccessfully, to subjugate them in the eighth to seventh centuries BC, when they fought campaign after campaign against successive queens and kings “of the Arabs” (Eph^cal 1982: 81–191). In the mid-sixth century Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, conquered six oases in north-western Arabia¹¹ and took

¹¹ These were Taymā', Dedān, Fadak, Khaybar, Yadr', and Yathrib (Gadd 1958: 80–85), see Fig. 2.

up residence in Taymāʾ for ten years between 552–543 BC (Gadd 1958; Beaulieu 1989: 149–185). We know this not only from Nabonidus' own inscriptions but also from graffiti in the Taymanitic alphabet, which mention his presence and that of his officials (Hayajneh 2001a; 2001b; Müller & Said 2001). It will be clear from Figure 2, that by conquering Taymāʾ, Dedān, and Yathrib (modern Medina), Nabonidus gained control of the northern parts of all the western routes of the frankincense trade (Macdonald 2009a IX: 334–336, 349).

There are several curious things about the script of Taymāʾ. So far, apart from a number of gravestones, all the texts carved in it are graffiti. There are no official government inscriptions, nor are there any official religious texts in this script, although a number of graffiti contain prayers and religious statements. This is the situation so far, and it should be noted that the vast majority of these graffiti are from the *environs* of Taymāʾ rather than inscriptions from the oasis itself, though this may simply be because the graffiti on desert rocks have been left undisturbed in contrast to the continuous occupation of the oasis. However, the ongoing Saudi-German excavations in the oasis may change this at any moment. Like all the alphabets of the South Semitic script family except Dadanitic, on which see below, the Taymanitic alphabet consists only of consonants, and vowels are normally not represented. Like Ancient South Arabian and the scripts used in the other North Arabian oases, Taymanitic often marks the division between words by word-dividers, usually in the form of short lines or dots.

Taymanitic graffiti can be written in any direction, but the majority are written horizontally from right to left or left to right and, when there is more than one line, in boustrophedon, an arrangement generally found in scripts which are used principally for carving, rather than for writing with ink. This is because, in a script where each letter is separate, rather than joined to the one that follows, the direction is of little consequence to the stonemason or to someone scratching or hammering a graffito on a rock face. However, if you are writing with a pen, it is difficult to cut a nib that can write equally fluently in both directions. The same may have been true of the blades used to incise texts on sticks in South Arabia, since I am informed by Peter Stein (personal communication) that, without exception, even the earliest of these from the tenth century BC, runs only from right to left, even though, some 200 years later, some inscriptions on stone in the *musnad* run boustrophedon. This suggests that boustrophedon is not simply an early stage in the

development of a script, as is usually assumed, but was a conscious aesthetic choice by the designer of the inscription.¹²

One of the lasting effects of Nabonidus' sojourn in Taymāʾ, was the introduction to the oasis of Aramaic as the language and script of prestige. Over the following decades, the Taymanitic alphabet seems to have died out, or at least we do not yet have any texts datable to a later period. Instead, the only inscriptions from the later times are in Aramaic. At first, it was the Imperial Aramaic used by the bureaucracies of the Babylonian and later the Achaemenid Persian Empire.¹³ It is interesting that when — probably in the Achaemenid period — the kings of Lihyān ruled Taymāʾ, the inscriptions they set up in Taymāʾ were carved in Imperial Aramaic,¹⁴ whereas those which the same kings left in their own oasis, Dedān, were carved in the local (South Semitic) Dadanitic script (see below). Later, probably after the fall of the Achaemenid empire and the end of the regularizing influence of its chancellery, there developed a form of the Aramaic script which seems to have been peculiar to the oasis itself.¹⁵ Probably, in the late first century BC this was supplanted by the Nabataean version of the Aramaic script, when Taymāʾ seems to have come under Nabataean cultural influence.¹⁶

¹² It is interesting that Pirenne (1956: 97), followed by many subsequent scholars working on Ancient South Arabian inscriptions, considered that “le boustrophédon constitue une *caractéristique suffisante* pour attribuer une inscription à cette période [sc. that of her earliest “graphies”, A and B]” (italics in the original), even though she recognized that other inscriptions from the same period were unidirectional. However, there are also boustrophedon inscriptions from much later, fifth–fourth centuries BC for instance, at the Barāʾn Temple in Maʾrib; see for instance Daum *et al.* 2000: 285, no. 35M; Nebes 1992: 162.

¹³ See CIS ii 113–116; Degen 1974, nos 1–10; Cross 1986; Beyer & Livingstone 1987; 1990.

¹⁴ These inscriptions were found by the Saudi-German excavations at Taymāʾ. See Deputy Ministry of Antiquities and Museums 2007: 31 (photograph); al-Said in press; Eichmann, Schaudig & Hausleiter 2006: 168; and Eichmann 2009: 61. Several others have since been discovered. I am most grateful to Professor Eichmann and Dr Hausleiter for inviting me to participate in the 2010 season of excavations at Tayma and to Dr Muhammad al-Najem, director of the Taymāʾ Museum, for giving me access to the inscriptions in the Museum storeroom.

¹⁵ CIS ii 336 = Milik 1978.

¹⁶ Although a number of inscriptions in Imperial Aramaic and the local form of the Aramaic script have been known for many years (see the previous two notes), the first texts in the *Nabataean* script from Taymāʾ were found in the recent Saudi-German excavations; see Eichmann 2009: 59–66. In March 2009, a Nabataean inscription dated to AD 204 was discovered during roadworks in Taymāʾ; see Al-Najem & Macdonald 2009.

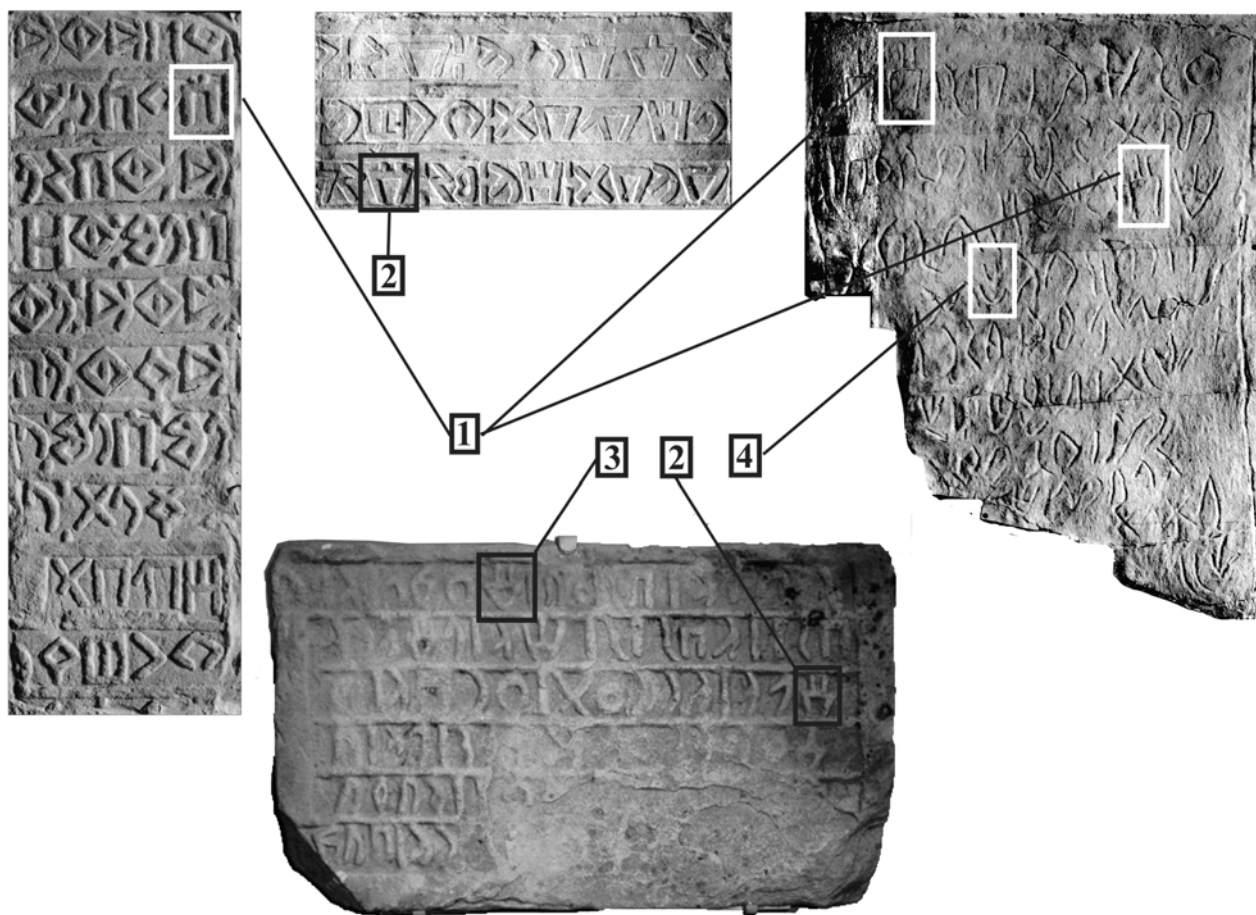


FIGURE 3. Developments in the shape of Dadanitic ʿ. The numbers refer to the different forms of the letters as discussed in the paper. From left to right: JSLih 49, JSLih 42 (upper), Said 1999: 15–25, no. 2 (lower), and JSLih 71.

The large oasis of Dedān (modern al-ʿUlā) dominated the other great route to the north (Fig. 2; Macdonald 2009a IX: 334, 337–338, 341–343). It too developed an alphabet of its own, probably over a considerable period, though we have little or no firm dating evidence as yet.¹⁷ At Dedān, we have a considerable number of public inscriptions, mostly carved in relief, plus several hundred graffiti, but as at Taymāʿ, no documents on perishable materials comparable to the sticks found in South Arabia. On the other hand, there are certain indications that at Dedān such documents, either written in ink or incised on soft wood, may have existed. All the inscriptions and virtually all the graffiti are written from right to left and

there are no texts in boustrophedon. As I mentioned in connection with the Ancient South Arabian scripts, writing in only one direction usually develops because of the practical requirements of pens and possibly blades, and is a matter of indifference to the stonemason. The fact that we have no inscriptions in boustrophedon at Dedān therefore suggests — and, of course, it can be no more than a suggestion — that the script had been used for documents written in ink or possibly incised on wood for some time before it came to be carved on stone.

Moreover, certain letters develop forms which it is difficult to explain if the script was used only for carving on stone and which are more likely to have developed through writing with a pen. This can be seen, for instance, in the development of the shape of *alif* (see Fig. 3). In the formal version it has straight vertical “legs” (as in

¹⁷ Caskel’s attempts to create a palaeographical sequence (1954: 21–44), are based on an abuse of palaeographical and historical method; see Macdonald, forthcoming, *a* and *b*.

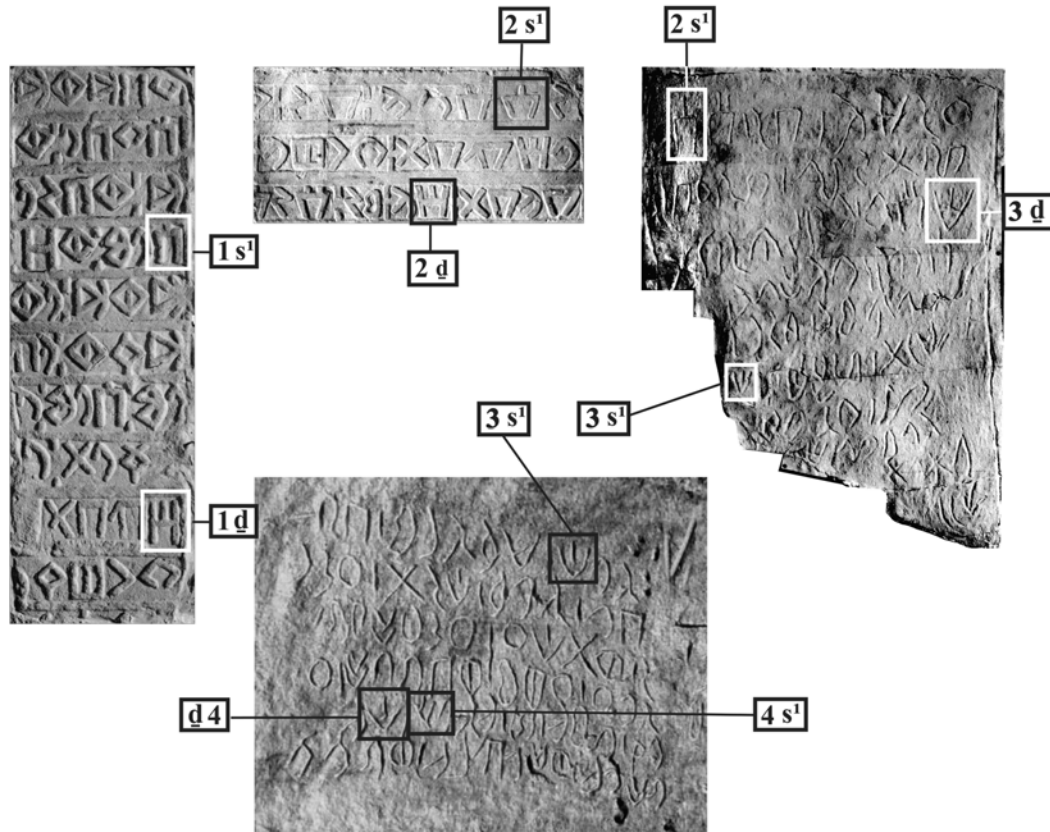


FIGURE 4. Developments in the shapes of Dadanitic *d* and *s'*. From left to right: JSLih 49, JSLih 42 (upper), JSLih 70 (lower), JSLih 71.

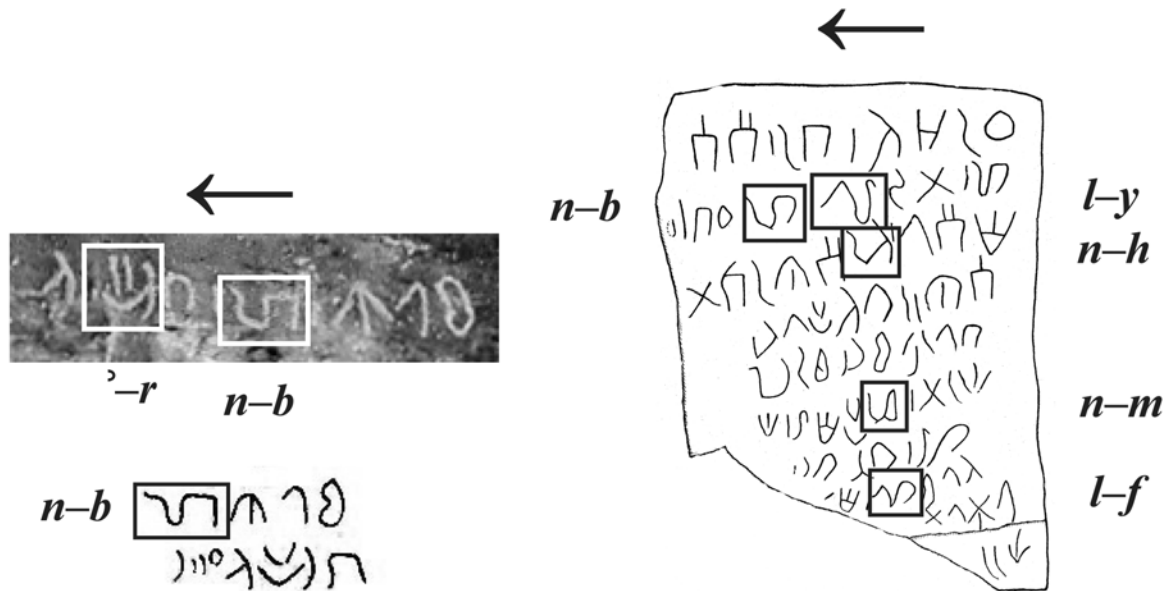


FIGURE 5. Ligatures in Dadanitic inscriptions. The arrows show the direction of writing. On the left, two different graffiti by the same man, Grh bn Br'h, the upper is unpublished and the lower is JSLih 375. On the right JSLih 71.

1), but it can be seen that there is a tendency for these to converge (as in 2) and even to form a triangle (as in 3) and eventually the horizontal bar disappears and it becomes two inverted chevrons (as in 4). This form is regularly found in the same text as ones with vertical or converging legs, as can be seen in the photograph on the right of Figure 3.

A similar process takes place with the form of the letter *ḡāl* and with that of *s'* (Fig. 4), two letters which, from having completely different shapes in the formal versions (as in 1), end up with almost identical informal shapes (as in 4). It is important to note that, with all these letters, the informal shapes must have evolved *in parallel* with the use of the formal ones, since we regularly find them used side by side in the same inscription. It is strange, but it appears that the stonemasons and those who employed them, considered the informal shapes to be valid alternatives to the formal ones, even within the same text.

There are also occasional examples of ligatures joining letters (Fig. 5). Ligatures only develop when writing with a pen since they increase the ease and speed of writing by removing the necessity of lifting the pen between letters. If found in a graffito, therefore, they are generally a good indication that the carver is used to writing in pen and ink.¹⁸

It would stand to reason that these oases, which were so heavily involved in commerce between the literate societies of South Arabia and those in Egypt, the Levant, and Mesopotamia, would use writing for record-keeping and communication. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Yariris far away in Carchemish would have known of the Taymanitic script or bothered to learn it, if it had not been used for commercial and perhaps diplomatic and legal documents. Small texts in the scripts of these oases, and other variants, have been found in Mesopotamia, Iran, Syria, and Palestine,¹⁹ again suggesting that the merchants of the oases carried their scripts with them in their international business, something they would surely only do if they were using writing in their work.

The third great oasis of north-west Arabia was Dūmah (known as Dūmat al-Jandal in the Middle Ages and al-Jawf today). It seems also to have had its own offshoot of the South Semitic script family, but so far alas, this is known from only three graffiti (Winnett & Reed 1970: 80–

81, nos. 21–23). Dūmah was in a strategic position on the south–north trade routes, since from here caravans could go north-east to Mesopotamia or due north up the Wādī Sirhān to the Levant (Fig. 2, and Macdonald 2009a IX: 335–337). In the eighth and seventh centuries BC, Dūmah was the cult centre of several Arab tribes, particularly Qēdār, which the Assyrian empire tried unsuccessfully to conquer. It was an important religious centre and the Arab queens who led the resistance against the Assyrians seem also to have been priestesses (see Eph'al 1982: 118–123 and n. 400). The Assyrians twice carried off the images of six of the deities worshipped there²⁰ and it is interesting that three of these, *ʿtrs'm* (which appears as ^{ilu}*A-tar-sa-ma-a-a-in* in the Assyrian Annals), *rḡw* (which appears as ^{ilu}*Ru-ul-da-a-a-u*), and *nhy* (which appears as ^{ilu}*Nu-ḡa-a-a*),²¹ are invoked in the graffiti in the script of Dūmah, and in the scripts of the nomads of north and central Arabia, on which see below.

So far, I have emphasized the links between the North Arabian oases and the kingdoms to the north of them. However, the principal merchandise on which they depended came, of course, from the south, and with it came the merchants of the kingdoms of Saba² and MaʿTn. It is likely that South Arabian merchants would have used writing in their business and brought their skills with them to the north. Indeed, the members of what is assumed to have been a Minaean commercial station at Dedān left a number of public inscriptions and graffiti there and presumably wrote, or had a scribe write for them, documents on perishable materials like palm-leaf stalks, though none have been discovered there as yet. It would be very interesting to know whether the Minaeans had any influence on the writing practices of the local populations of Dedān, or vice versa.

I would suggest, then, that the picture that emerges from the settled populations of ancient west Arabia is one of literate societies in which, even if the majority of the population was illiterate, the written word was fundamental to the functioning of government, religion, and especially commerce. There must also have been a sizeable number of private citizens able to carve graffiti in the forms of the script used for public inscriptions. In

¹⁸ On playful redundant ligatures in graffiti see Macdonald 1989; 2009a II: 386–387.

¹⁹ These are the “Dispersed Oasis North Arabian” texts, on which see Macdonald 2009a III: 33.

²⁰ Sennacherib took them between 691 and 689 BC and they were returned by Esarhaddon between 681 and 676. Esarhaddon then took them away again between 673 and 669. One of them, Atarsamain, was returned by Assurbanipal in 668; see Eph'al 1982: 119, 125–129, 147.

²¹ See Campbell Thompson 1931: 20, lines 10–11. For the identification of ^{ilu}*Ru-ul-da-a-a-u* as *Rḡw*, in which *ld* is an attempt to reproduce the lateral pronunciation of /ḡ/ (cf. Spanish *alcalde* < Arabic *al-qāḍī*) see Milik 1972: 49.

South Arabia, we now have evidence of the extensive use, through scribes, of writing in day-to-day activities. In the north, we have as yet no direct evidence for the use of writing at this level, but there are strong indications that it must have existed there as well.

* * *

However, parallel to all this, there was another truly remarkable phenomenon in ancient Arabia: vast numbers of nomads were literate and covered the desert rocks with their graffiti.²² This is surprising since nomads do not usually have much use for writing, particularly in the days before there was a ready supply of cheap paper. Their societies are perfectly adapted to life without literacy, where memory is highly developed and communication is by word of mouth. In antiquity, writing was even less useful to nomads than it is today, since papyrus outside Egypt was relatively expensive; the desert did not provide palm-leaf stalks or sticks for incising; they had more urgent uses for the leather provided by their herds; and they used little or no pottery, since it was likely to get broken in the nomadic life, so sherds, which provided a common writing surface in settled areas, were also unavailable. The only support they had in abundance was provided by the rocks of the desert. However, for most people these are not much use for sending messages or recording information in a nomadic milieu.²³

So why did the nomads of Arabia learn to read and write but apparently use these skills only for graffiti? At this distance of time it is impossible to be sure, but the following seems a likely hypothesis.²⁴ People in non-literate societies — i.e. those in which memory and oral communication serve the purposes for which we use writing — need to have very well-developed memories in order to store all the information which we would normally write down. This also helps them learn things relatively quickly and easily. In the desert, curiosity is a survival skill, for in a hostile environment a lack of curiosity can be fatal. I would suggest that if a nomad went to an oasis like Dedān, Taymā³, or Dūmah and saw a merchant writing a receipt or a letter, he might have asked “What are you doing” and, when told, might have said “Teach me to do that”, simply out of curiosity.²⁵

²² For a more detailed exploration of this subject see Macdonald 2009a I: 74–96.

²³ See Macdonald 2009a I: 81, n. 102 on attempts to suggest that these graffiti had practical purposes.

²⁴ For a more detailed exposition of this hypothesis see Macdonald 2009a I: 78–82.

²⁵ For modern examples of this happening see Macdonald 2009a I: 78–79, 96–97.

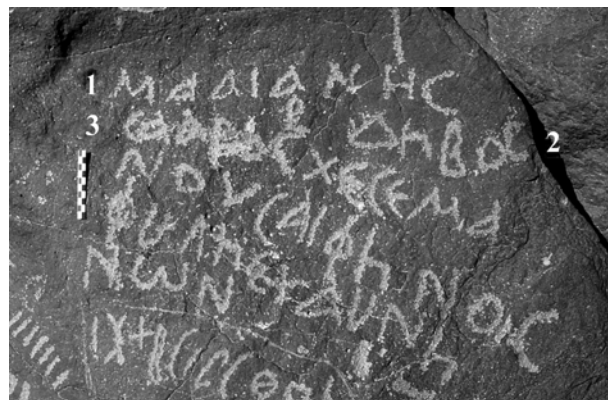


FIGURE 6. Graffiti carved in Greek by members of nomadic tribes in southern Syria (see Macdonald, Al Muʿzzin & Nehmé 1996: 480–485; Macdonald 2009a I: 76).

One might have thought that while learning letter shapes was relatively easy, mastering the concept of distinguishing between consonants and vowels and using only the former was a more sophisticated and difficult process. And yet it does not seem to have been so. Indeed, we have examples of nomads in southern Syria who learnt to write their names in Greek, and therefore with vowels, as well as in their own alphabets where they used only consonants (Fig. 6).²⁶ In view of my earlier remarks on learning to read from inscriptions in South Arabia, it is interesting to note that of the nomads who carved the three Greek graffiti in Figure 6, the author of number 1 had learned his Greek letters from inscriptions (as seen in the shape of the *ēta*, like a capital “H”), while the authors of numbers 2 and 3 had learned from handwriting (as seen in their *ētas* which lack the top right vertical stroke).

Having learnt to write, the nomad would return to the desert and no doubt show off his skills to his family and friends, tracing the letters in the dust or cutting them with a sharp stone on a rock. Because his nomadic society had no other materials to write on, the skill would have remained more of a curiosity than something of practical use, except for one thing. Nomadic life involves long periods of solitary idleness, guarding the herds while they pasture, keeping a lookout for game and enemies, etc. Anything that can help pass the time is welcome. Some people carved their tribal marks on the rocks; others carved drawings, often with great skill. Writing provided the perfect pastime and both men and women among the nomads seized it with great enthusiasm, covering

²⁶ For discussion of these texts see Macdonald, Al Muʿzzin & Nehmé 1996: 480–485; Macdonald 2009a I: 76–77.

the rocks of the Syro-Arabian deserts with scores of thousands of graffiti. The graffiti was the perfect medium for such circumstances. It could be as short or as long as the authors wanted, and since they were carving purely for their own amusement they could say whatever they liked, in whatever order new thoughts occurred to them, and it did not matter if they made mistakes. When they tired of carving their own graffiti, they could wander off and vandalize someone else's, often by subtly altering the letters to make it say something different, or by adding something rude!

The introduction of writing to nomadic societies in Arabia probably happened many times and, in addition, individual nomads from one group no doubt passed on the skill to individuals from another group. We have evidence of this informal "teaching" process in a number of Safaitic graffiti, which simply list the letters of the alphabet. These are not in any traditional letter order, such as that used in the Phoenico-Aramaic alphabet (from which we get our ABC) or that used for the Ancient South Arabian alphabet (the *hllhm*). Instead, they are ordered according to each person's perception of which letters had similar shapes (see Macdonald 2009a I: 86–87).

The result of this multiple introduction of writing to nomadic groups and its informal dissemination is that we find many different alphabets used by nomads to write graffiti. Because they had nothing but rocks to write on, writing did not penetrate their society and make it depend on literacy, and it remained simply a pastime, though, in these circumstances, this "pastime" was in fact a practical use for writing. We thus have the curious phenomenon of a non-literate society which retained its use of memory and oral communication for all important and practical matters, but in which the vast majority of the population must have been literate. The huge numbers of graffiti by equally huge numbers of individuals suggest that there must have been almost universal literacy among the nomads of the Syro-Arabian deserts over a considerable period. We are reminded of the example of the Tuareg mentioned above, among whom there is almost universal literacy in their own script (the Tifinagh) but who maintain an entirely oral culture and use their own alphabet purely for fun, employing foreign languages and scripts when they need writing for a practical purpose such as sending a letter.

A script that is used only for carving informally on rocks develops in a rather different way from those used for public inscriptions or for private documents on perishable materials, in a literate society. For a start, since the author is carving the text purely for his

own amusement, he is not particularly concerned with whether or not it is comprehensible. The author knows what he means, and that is all there is to it. Thus, there is no incentive to develop a fixed direction of writing, separation of words, ways of showing vowels, etc. which are all things designed to help the reader. In these graffiti there are no spaces between words and no word-dividers, no vowels, and while in some of the scripts the text can run right to left or left to right (e.g. Thamudic B), in the others it runs vertically (e.g. Thamudic C and D), and in yet others it can go in any direction (Hismaic and Safaitic).

Using a script that is spread informally and employed purely to carve graffiti also has an interesting effect on the letter forms. In some cases, for instance, the same letter form can stand for completely different sounds in different scripts, in others a completely new form seems to have been invented, or adapted from another alphabet (see the script table in Macdonald 2009a III: 34). Because of the nature of the surfaces most of the letters can face in any direction and no letter is dependent on its stance for its identity.

The earliest firm date we have for the graffiti by nomads is the mid-sixth century BC, when a Thamudic B text mentions Nabonidus, king of Babylon.²⁷ Eight centuries later, the latest to be dated is a Thamudic D text (JSTham 1) giving the name and patronym of a woman buried at Ḥegrā (modern Madā'in Sālīh) in AD 267, next to an epitaph in the Nabataean script (JSNab 17, see below). In between we have many Safaitic graffiti that mention the Nabataeans, the Romans, and other peoples. But while these scripts of the nomads continued to be used much later than those of the oases, they are thought to have died out by the fourth century AD, for reasons we cannot explain.²⁸

* * *

However, there are other, more shadowy, dialects in pre-Islamic Arabia whose speakers rarely seem to have felt the need to write in them. I have suggested elsewhere that the language which I have called "North Arabian" (Macdonald 2009a III: 29–30) was made up of two

²⁷ This was discovered and photographed by Dr Muhammad al-Najem, director of the Taymā' Museum, some distance from the oasis. A photograph, but no reading, was published in *al-Taymā'* 2006: 90. It should not be confused with the Taymanitic inscriptions mentioning Nabonidus, referred to above.

²⁸ The reason for the assumption that they ceased to be used by, or within, the fourth century BC is simply the lack of any reference to Christianity in them. This is very unsatisfactory, but at present we have no other evidence.

mutually comprehensible dialect bundles, most strikingly distinguished by the form of the definite article: one, “Ancient North Arabian” (ANA) which used the definite article *h(n)-*, and the other, “Old Arabic”,²⁹ which used *al-*. Needless to say, this is not the only feature distinguishing these groups, but simply the most convenient for the purposes of classification.

There is a very curious difference in the way these two groups of dialects were used. While, as we have seen, there are thousands of public inscriptions and graffiti in the ANA dialects, both in the settled oases and among the nomads, at present there appear to be only just under a dozen texts wholly or partially in Old Arabic before the sixth century AD, when we find the earliest inscriptions in the Arabic script (Macdonald 2008a). I say “appear to be” because we need to bear in mind that a large majority of the inscriptions in the ANA *scripts* are graffiti and when these consist solely of names it is, of course, impossible to identify the dialect or even the language spoken by the author.³⁰ Nevertheless, it has to be said that in the fairly large numbers of these graffiti which contain more than names, only a handful show signs that their authors may have spoken Old Arabic rather than ANA dialects (Macdonald 2008a: 468).

The Old Arabic inscriptions which have been identified are written in a number of different alphabets: Ancient South Arabian; Dadanitic (the ANA script used in Dedān); in one or more of those used by the nomads; and in the Nabataean script. This shows that Old Arabic co-existed with ANA and was not simply a later development from it, but it also appears to mean that before the sixth century AD, Old Arabic was so rarely written that it did not have its own script.

The only attempt known so far to write Old Arabic in the Ancient South Arabian script is from the city of Qaryat al-Fāw on the north-western edge of the Empty Quarter, on a major trade route from Yemen to eastern Arabia and the Gulf. At certain periods, Fāw seems to have been dominated by the Arab tribes of Kinda, Madhḥig, and Qaḥṭān, so it seems likely that, at least during these periods, one or more dialects of Old Arabic were spoken there. The excavators reportedly found large numbers of

inscriptions,³¹ and from those published so far, it seems clear that the written language of the oasis was Sabaic, though there are reportedly a few texts in other languages and scripts, perhaps by visitors. Because Kinda, Madhḥig, and Qaḥṭān are famous Arab tribes in the literature of the Islamic period we tend to assume that all their members must have spoken Old Arabic. While this is a perfectly reasonable assumption, we should perhaps remember that it is no more than that, and that some at least of those at Fāw may have spoken Sabaic as their first, or at least their second language.

However, if a speaker of Old Arabic at Qaryat al-Fāw wanted to commission an inscription, the commonest, and therefore the easiest and probably cheapest, practice would be for it to be expressed in the Sabaic language and script, since the scribes would have been used to writing in these. If, however, the customer insisted that the language of the text should be Old Arabic, the scribe would have had to find a way to express this in the Sabaic script, because he was used to writing Sabaic, and Old Arabic, as a normally unwritten language, had no dedicated script of its own. One such inscription from Fāw has been published: the epitaph of ʿIgl bn Hfʿm.³² There are other inscriptions carved in the Sabaic script but almost certainly in a North Arabian dialect, though they do not provide sufficient information to allow us to classify them as either ANA or Old Arabic.³³ We find specifically Old Arabic “intrusions” in texts in written languages in north-west Arabia. As mentioned above, at Ḥegrā, where Nabataean Aramaic was the written language, we have an attempt in the third century AD to write an epitaph in Aramaic helped out with Arabic words and phrases (JSNab 17) and, at the nearby oasis of Dedān, an honorific inscription in Dadanitic (JSLih 71) which also shows Old Arabic intrusions. These texts provide positive evidence for the hypothesis that Old Arabic was a purely spoken language at these periods, and this bolsters the negative evidence from the scarcity of texts purely in the Old Arabic language and the fact that it did not have a dedicated script.

Yet speakers of Old Arabic must have had the same needs as speakers of Ancient North Arabian: the need to commemorate the dead with a gravestone or epitaph, to honour an important person, to record religious acts, or to proclaim decrees if they were in government. Similarly,

²⁹ I am using the term “Old Arabic” in the same sense as Old English, Old French, Old Aramaic, etc. to refer to the group of dialects which are considered to be the ancestors of the various forms of the mediaeval and modern languages, in this case the spoken and written Arabic of the Islamic period. See further Macdonald 2008a: 464; 2009a III: 30.

³⁰ See Macdonald 2004: 493–494 on the impossibility of divining the language spoken by a person from the etymology of his/her name.

³¹ Unfortunately, very few of these have been published, see Ansary 1982: 142–147.

³² For bibliography see Macdonald 2008a: 467.

³³ These are the inscriptions I have called “Pure Undifferentiated North Arabian”, see Macdonald 2009a III: 54–55.

if they were nomads, they must have felt the need to help pass the time while guarding the pasturing herds. Throughout the western two-thirds of the Peninsula, speakers of ANA and Ancient South Arabian created and adapted numerous scions of the South Semitic script family, and used writing for all kinds of purposes; so why did those speaking Old Arabic apparently stand aloof from this? At a later date, we know from the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, that the presence of inscribed rocks in the desert was sufficiently well known to be used in poetic imagery,³⁴ and yet speakers of Old Arabic seem to have had no desire to add to their number.

As I mentioned earlier, in eastern Arabia inscriptions of any sort are very rare and those which have been found are in foreign scripts and, when they consist of more than names, in foreign languages: Akkadian cuneiform (Potts 1990, i: 305–307; 2010; André-Salvini & Lombard 1997; Glassner 2008), Aramaic (Healey & Bin Seray 1999–2000), Greek (Gatier, Lombard & al-Sindi 2002; Gatier 2007 and references there), and Ancient South Arabian (Robin 1994: 82–85). There are just over forty inscriptions, mostly gravestones, from Thāj, Qatīf, and other places in eastern Arabia, which are written in the Ancient South Arabian script (Sima 2002; Robin 1994: 80–81). However, the content of these texts is unfortunately so limited that at present it is impossible to identify the language precisely, though it may be a North Arabian dialect.³⁵ This uncertainty means that, in fact, we cannot even be sure what language or languages were *spoken* in eastern Arabia in the pre-Islamic period.

Is this apparent contrast between the west and the east of the Peninsula significant? Does it perhaps suggest that eastern Arabia was the home of Old Arabic in the first millennium BC and the first three centuries AD, and that by the third century AD speakers of Old Arabic dialects were moving west and in some way “replacing” the speakers of ANA dialects? Quite apart from the fact that such a hypothesis is based on an absence of evidence and must therefore be treated with suspicion, it would not explain why those speakers of Old Arabic who were nomads did not take over the ANA scripts still in use in the desert and why these were abandoned.

In South Arabia, the *musnad* and the *zabūr* remained in use until the mid-sixth century after which there is an epigraphic silence until the first inscriptions in Arabic

some decades after the hijra. Yet, although from the early centuries AD onwards large numbers of Arabs had been settling in South Arabia, we do not have a single example from pre-Islamic Yemen of an attempt to write Old Arabic in the South Arabian script. In the north, all the ANA scripts, even those used by nomads, seem to have died out by the fourth century, and the Nabataean form of the Aramaic script was left as the only vehicle for writing in North Arabia.

* * *

From the mid-first millennium BC onwards, there are frequent references to “Arabs” living throughout the Fertile Crescent, from eastern Egypt, along the eastern Mediterranean, and throughout Syria and Mesopotamia, as well as in the Peninsula. These “Arabs” are described as having various ways of life: merchants, settled farmers, kings with large numbers of chariots, rulers of cities, brigands, and nomads. *Pace* Jan Retsö (2003: 577–626), I find it difficult to think of any characteristic other than a mix of language and some cultural elements which would identify — both to themselves and to the outside world — such geographically and socially diverse groups as the same people (Macdonald, 2009c: 304–307).

Among these, the Nabataeans are perhaps the best known and have left us the most extensive remains. The Nabataeans used Aramaic as their written language. Indeed, one of the first things we hear about them while they were still nomads in southern Jordan is that they “wrote a letter in Syrian characters [i.e. in the Aramaic script]” (Diodorus Siculus 19.96.1).³⁶ They gradually developed their own dialect of written Aramaic and their own form of the script. The use of Aramaic as a written language was already well established in northern Arabia, by the time they settled at Ḥegrā just north of Dedān, sometime in the first century BC, and brought with them the practice of using their form of the Aramaic language and script for writing. As mentioned earlier, Nabonidus seems to have introduced Imperial Aramaic as a prestige written language and script to Taymāʾ, and possibly other parts of north-west Arabia, in the sixth century BC. In Taymāʾ it seems to have ousted the local script but not, it appears, in Dedān where there are only a handful of graffiti in Imperial Aramaic³⁷ among the hundreds of texts in the local script, and no pre-Nabataean formal Aramaic inscriptions, as yet. From the first century AD, Nabataean Aramaic appears to have spread in north-west Arabia as a prestige written language. Indeed, long after AD 106,

³⁴ e.g. Labīd *Muʿallaqah* l. 2: ... *ka-mā ḍamina ʿl-wuḥiyyan silāmuḥā* “... as though the stones bear writings”.

³⁵ A slightly more informative text with what appears to be an interesting mixture of North Arabian and Aramaic will be published shortly, in Macdonald, forthcoming, c.

³⁶ On this, see most recently, Macdonald 2009a I: 97.

³⁷ See, for example, JSNab 224, 390; Naṣīf 1988: pl. CXXIV (a).

when the Romans annexed the Nabataean kingdom and renamed it *Provincia Arabia*, Nabataean Aramaic remained the primary and possibly the only local prestige written language of the region. The local scripts of Taymāʾ, Dedān, and Dūmah appear to have disappeared by this time and the only survivors of the South Semitic script in the north of Arabia were those used by the nomads, which clearly would have had no prestige at all.

This is neatly symbolized by a temple in a remote area of the Hījāz, called al-Ruwwāfah. After the annexation of the kingdom and its conversion into the Roman Province of Arabia, the language of government changed to Greek, but Nabataean Aramaic continued to be used as the written language for social and cultural purposes by many of its inhabitants, particularly in the more remote areas of the Province, like north-west Arabia. The temple at al-Ruwwāfah was built between AD 167 and 169 at the instigation of two successive governors of the Roman Province of Arabia, probably by a unit of the Roman army levied from the nomadic tribe of Thamūd (Macdonald 2009a VIII: 9–14). On it was placed a dedication to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus in Greek, for the Roman side, and Nabataean as the local script of prestige, rather than one of the ANA scripts used by the nomads for graffiti. In consequence, it is doubtful whether the men in whose name the temple was built, or many of the people who passed it, would have been able to read the inscription in either language, but this was not the object of the exercise.

A different relationship between Nabataean Aramaic, Old Arabic, and an ANA script is seen a century later in Hēgrā, where a man called Kaʿbū carved or commissioned an epitaph for his mother in Nabataean Aramaic. However, whoever composed it had a very poor grasp of the Aramaic language and had to fill out the gaps in his knowledge with Arabic words and phrases. It may have been he who added beside it her name and patronym in Thamudic D, one of the scripts of the nomads, perhaps as a sentimental reminder of their origins. If so, this could be one of the rare examples of a speaker of Old Arabic using an ANA script, though of course this can be no more than speculation dependent on certain assumptions.³⁸

A similar situation occurs in a burial cave at Dayr al-Kahf in northern Jordan on the very edge of the desert (Macdonald 2006: 293, 296–298). Here, six large sarcophagi have been carved out of the rock. Around

three of the walls, just below the ceiling, there is a neat (and this time correct) inscription in the Aramaic script of the Ḥawrān, explaining that a certain Ḥulayfū and his brothers, the sons of Awsū, made this tomb. But on each sarcophagus is the name of the deceased in one of the scripts of the nomads, Safaitic. The general announcement is in Nabataean, but the personal identification is in the script they used at home.

* * *

Ten years ago, I pointed out that the quite natural assumption that the Nabataeans spoke Arabic, even though they wrote in Aramaic, was not based on much sound evidence.³⁹ Shortly after this, however, some very compelling evidence was published in the legal papyri from the late first and early second centuries AD found in a cave in Naḥal Ḥever, to the west of the Dead Sea. These papyri are in Greek, Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic, and Nabataean Aramaic, and one of the very interesting points made by the editors is that in the Jewish Aramaic documents strings of Aramaic legal terms are followed by their equivalents in Hebrew; whereas in the Nabataean documents, strings of Aramaic legal terms are followed by their equivalents in Arabic. In contrast to the vast majority of the handful of Arabic loanwords previously identified in Nabataean, which come as one might expect from inscriptions in Arabia, these documents come from a Jewish community in the heart of the Nabataean kingdom, in what is now central Jordan.

If the Nabataeans had an established legal terminology in Arabic, this surely suggests that they used Arabic in their legal proceedings, even though the results were recorded in Aramaic. That such a practice is entirely possible is suggested by a comparison with the even more complicated situation in thirteenth-century England. In his famous book *From memory to written record: England 1066–1307*, Michael Clanchy analyses the interplay of languages in the establishment of the *veredicta* (jurors' answers, or "true sayings") in response to questions posed by the justices.

First of all, the jurors were presented with the justices' questions (the "articles of eyre" technically) in writing in either Latin or French. They replied orally, probably in English, although their answers

³⁸ These are that Kaʿbū composed JSNab 17 himself, rather than employing someone else to do so; and that JSTham 1 was carved or commissioned by Kaʿbū, rather than it being a contemporary or later addition.

³⁹ It has sometimes been suggested that I claimed that the Nabataeans did *not* speak Arabic, but this is not the case. I merely pointed out that the evidence that they *did* speak Arabic evinced up to that time (2000), which mainly consisted of the etymological language of personal names, was not sufficient to support such a claim.

were written down as *veredicta* by an enrolling clerk in Latin. When the justices arrived in court, the chief clerk read out the enrolled presentiments or *veredicta* in French, mentally translating them from Latin as he went along. On behalf of the jurors, their foreman or spokesman then presented the same answers at the bar in English. Once the presentiments, in both their French and English oral versions, were accepted by the court, they were recorded in the justices' plea rolls in Latin. Thus, between the justices' written questions being presented initially to the jurors and the final record of the plea roll, the language in use had changed at least five times, although it begins and ends with writings in Latin. ... If the oral English statement, which [the foreman of the jurors] presented at the bar, deviated in any detail from the written statements [in Latin and French], the jurors faced imprisonment.⁴⁰

Compared to this, the proposed situation in which Nabataean legal proceedings could have taken place in Arabic but with all records being made in Aramaic, would be relatively simple.

In the late fourth century AD, Epiphanius of Salamis famously reported that the Nabataeans in Petra and Elusa sang hymns in Arabic. I also suspect (though it is unprovable) that the two lines of rhetorical Arabic included in the Nabataean inscription at ʿĒn ʿAvdat, which records an offering to the deified king Obodas, are a quotation from the Nabataean liturgy in praise of him. Religious liturgies tend to be extremely conservative in language, as in much else, as exemplified by the use of Latin in the Roman Catholic church until the Second Vatican Council, with a resurgence under Benedict XVI, or the continued use of Byzantine Greek and Old Church Slavonic in the Eastern Orthodox churches. The use of an ancestral language in Nabataean religious practice would not therefore be at all unlikely. If the fact that their contemporaries referred to the Nabataeans as “Arabs” means that they were Arabic-speakers (Macdonald 2009c: 307–310), this ancestral language is likely to have been Arabic.

If this is correct — and it is a big “if” — one might then envisage a society, at least in the southern parts of the Nabataean kingdom and later of the Province, in which the language of communication in everyday life was Arabic, in which the religious liturgies, and possibly literary works, were in Arabic and passed down orally,

in which face-to-face political, administrative, and legal activity was conducted in Arabic; but when records or written communication were needed they were made in Aramaic. As I have suggested above, a similar, though not exactly comparable, situation existed in mediaeval Europe up to the late thirteenth century, where government, administrative, and legal activities were conducted orally in one or more vernaculars, but the written records and official communications were generally in Latin.

Even as late as the mid-fourth century AD, it was still possible to find those who could compose near perfect Aramaic for inscriptions, as another epitaph (of AD 356) from Ḥegṛā shows (Stiehl 1970). We also find Aramaic in the Nabataean Aramaic script still used in graffiti in north-west Arabia in the fourth and fifth centuries. But here we have to be careful. For these graffiti are extremely formulaic and the same handful of Aramaic words or phrases is almost always used in them: *šlm*, *dkr*, *br*, *b-tb*, etc. These could well be linguistic fossils used as ideograms⁴¹ and do not tell us what language the author actually *spoke*, any more than our use of *requiescat in pace* on gravestones does. What is much more exciting, is that some of these graffiti also include *Arabic* words and phrases (see Nehmé, this volume; and al-Ghabbān & Nehmé, forthcoming).

* * *

In these inscriptions and graffiti we have disjointed snapshots of the continuous but uncoordinated development of the Nabataean Aramaic script into the Arabic script. For it is now clear that the Arabic script was not created *ex nihilo* or consciously adapted from

⁴⁰ Clanchy 1993: 207. The whole chapter from which this passage is taken is a fascinating exploration of the interplay of the different languages used in mediaeval England.

⁴¹ As is *br* instead of *bn* in the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions of Namārah, Zebed, Jabal Usays, and Harrān. Pace Robin (2006: 331–332), the *r* is clear in each of these texts and it is not possible to read it as a final *n*. Robin says that he believes that these inscriptions “confondent probablement la graphie du *n* final avec celle du *r*, comme certaines inscriptions plus tardives (voir ill. 10, l’inscription du Wādī al-Šāmiya, et comparer *br* ligne 1, avec *bn*, lignes 3 et 4)” (ibid.). However, the inscription of Wādī al-Šāmiyyah is between one and three centuries later than these Old Arabic inscriptions and is thus rather a remote comparison. Moreover, the published photograph is not sufficiently clear to check the accuracy of the facsimile (p. 96, Fig. 7 here). But even if the latter is accurate, Robin has confused two quite different things. In the Wādī al-Šāmiyyah inscription, all the examples of *n* and *r* have very similar forms (with the exception of the *r* of ‘arba’in which is different from all the other examples of *r*) and this is clearly a feature of the author’s “hand”. He has not “confused” the shape of the two letters, any more than the authors of the Old Arabic texts did. Indeed, the latter all make a clear distinction between the shapes of *r* and final *n*.

another writing system,⁴² but is simply the latest form of the Nabataean script (Healey 1990–1991; Macdonald 2009b). As the Aramaic language came to be used less and less in Arabia, and Arabic at last started to be used for writing, the Nabataean script came to be associated with Arabic rather than with Aramaic, which is why we think of its latest phase as the “Arabic” script.

Now, as I have explained above, developments in a script tend to be pushed by writing in ink, not carving on stone. What we see in the inscriptions and graffiti is therefore a mixture of these developments with memories of the calligraphic letter forms used in public inscriptions. This means that we have to assume an extensive, and possibly increasing, use of writing on soft materials in the Nabataean script throughout the fourth to seventh centuries, since only this could produce the transitional letter forms and ligatures we see first in the “Nabataean” or “transitional” graffiti of the fifth century (see Nehmé, this volume), then in the early Arabic inscriptions of the sixth and seventh centuries, and the earliest Arabic papyri of the mid-seventh. This would also explain how a more or less consistent and apparently widely understood system of dots to distinguish between letters with the same form, could already have been in use by the first dated Arabic papyrus of 22 AH and the first dated inscription of the Islamic period (24 AH).⁴³ While the letter forms and most ligatures would, presumably, have developed in the way they did, regardless of whether the script written in ink was being used to express the Aramaic or the Arabic languages or both, certain orthographic features, such as the use of *tāʾ marbūṭah* and perhaps the development of *lām-alif*, are likely only to have developed through the use of the script to write Arabic.

Yet — and this is a crucial point — despite the extensive use of writing with pen and ink implied by (a) the development of the Nabataean into the Arabic script; (b) the confident handwriting of the earliest Arabic papyri; and (c) the reports from the early Islamic period mentioning writing and documents, Arab culture at the dawn of Islam was fundamentally oral.

⁴² As suggested by, for instance, Milik *apud* Starcky 1966: cols 932–934; Troupeau 1991; Briquel-Chatonnet 1997. See also the subtler and more nuanced approach of Robin (2006: 326–330), though this does not demonstrate *how* the Arabic script could have been adapted from the Syriac.

⁴³ The fact that the diacritical dots were used occasionally and not consistently at this period (see also Déroche, this volume), does not take away from the fact that the system by which the number and position of dots distinguished particular letters has, with a few exceptions, been widely accepted and understood from the earliest Islamic documents and inscriptions until the present day.

* * *

Gregor Schoeler has demonstrated this in a series of brilliant articles and books, and again in his paper in this volume. As he shows, writing in the early Islamic centuries was used for practical purposes, for letters or memoranda, for treaties, legal documents, etc. (Schoeler 2002: 21), but religious materials (with the eventual exception of the Qurʾān), poetry and literary prose, genealogy, and historical traditions were transmitted orally, with all that that entails for the gradual metamorphosis and “improvement” of the texts. This did not stop transmitters and scholars keeping often extensive notebooks as *aides-memoire*. But the “publication” of literary, historical, and religious matter was by oral transmission, not by the written word.

It is very doubtful that such a situation came about suddenly in the first Islamic century and therefore, although we have no direct evidence from the *Jāhiliyyah*, it seems safe to assume that this was a situation which early Islamic society in Arabia inherited. It is a situation that we, with our total dependence on literacy, may find difficult to comprehend, and it was one which was to change in subsequent centuries in Islamic society. The decisive event was surely the decision under the Caliph ʿUthmān (23/644–35/656) to fix the text of the Qurʾān by having it committed to writing. Naturally, there was opposition (Schoeler 2002: 33, 50, 54), and for many years after it was done, there were those who maintained that a fixed written form should be something unique to the Qurʾān and that to write down Traditions of the Prophet or interpretations of the Qurʾān was to put them on the same level as the Holy Book (Schoeler, this volume and references there). This could be interpreted as a rearguard action against Islam becoming a *written* culture, rather than continuing what we assume to have been a centuries-old tradition in which culture was published and transmitted orally, with writing reserved for non-cultural activities, such as administration and business.

The latter are the sorts of texts, which are usually written on perishable materials and so it is likely that the vast majority of these documents have indeed perished. Thus, one reason why Arabic appears to have been a purely spoken language, at least in late antiquity, may be because the written documents have not survived. However, their existence can be inferred from the way the Nabataean script changed and developed into what we think of as the “Arabic script”, an evolution that could only take place as a result of extensive writing in ink over a very long period.

Gradually, the use of the Aramaic language must have declined, in some places more quickly than in others, and since the requirement for written documents presumably remained, they came to be written in the only language available in the communities concerned, Old Arabic. If legal and administrative activities had always been carried on orally in Arabic, the necessary Arabic technical terminology would already have existed, the only change being the realization that the text did not need to be translated into Aramaic before it could be written down.

What I am suggesting therefore is that, before and immediately after the rise of Islam, Arab culture was in all important respects fundamentally oral, as is that of the Tuareg today. We know from the early Islamic period that poetry was transmitted orally and that the transmitters were expected to polish and change it, i.e. that it remained a living, protean thing (Schoeler, this volume and references there). The other most important aspect of ancient Arab culture, genealogy, also depends on oral transmission. For traditionally, genealogy in the Middle East, as in many other regions, is not simply a historical record, but a way of defining personal rights and responsibilities and of explaining social and political circumstances.⁴⁴ For this to be possible, the details at certain points in the genealogy need to be flexible and to change in order to “explain” shifting relationships and political positions in the real world. In an oral society, where “fact” is the consensus of what a sufficient number of people think they remember, it is very important that the tribal genealogy be kept in “men’s hearts”, because once it is fixed in writing it becomes a historical document, and no longer a constantly developing way of explaining social and political relationships. I would suggest that it was exactly because the tribal genealogies had not been written down in the *Jāhiliyyah*, that those responsible for producing the ideological infrastructure of the early Islamic state were able to incorporate the Old Testament genealogies into those of the Arab tribes. This “proved” the long-held belief that the Arabs were also descendants of Abraham,⁴⁵ and thus had an ancient relationship with the one true God. At the same time, they were producing a unifying “ethnic” identity for the “Arabs”, which had not existed before and which would distinguish them clearly from the conquered peoples, even when these became Muslims (see also Retsö 2006: 16). All this required that the Arab genealogies used had been transmitted orally,

⁴⁴ See for instance Lancaster 1981: 24–35 for the Bedouin; and, for a quite different use of genealogy in Yemen, Dresch 1989: 176–179.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, the very interesting exploration of the origins and spread of this belief in Millar 1993; 2005: 301–313.

and so were fluid enough to be adapted. The finished construction, however, was eventually committed to writing and became to all intents and purposes a fixed definition of what it was to be an “Arab”, i.e. someone who could trace his ancestry to a point in this genealogy.

* * *

There is one final irony. Alphabets of the South Semitic script family were used in Arabia for a millennium and a half. Some of them were extremely beautiful; all had the clarity of clearly distinguished letter forms and writing without ligatures. They had the right number of letters to represent all the consonants of the Arabic language. Yet, while these alphabets were flourishing, Arabic remained largely unwritten. Only when they had disappeared from North Arabia and were fading out in the South, did Arabic begin to be written, not in one of Arabia’s own scripts but in a form of the imported Aramaic alphabet (Macdonald 2008b). This was far less suitable than the South Semitic scripts, for it had begun with only twenty-two signs and by now had only sixteen different letter forms to represent the twenty-eight consonants of Arabic.⁴⁶ Yet, while the South Semitic scripts had been confined to Arabia apart from an offshoot in Ethiopia, this revitalized form of the Aramaic alphabet — the Arabic script — became the vehicle of a vibrant literary culture and has been used for many different languages, from the shores of the Atlantic to the South China Sea.⁴⁷

Sigla

CIS ii	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars II Inscriptiones Aramaicas continens.</i> Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1889–1954.
JSLih	Dadanitic inscriptions in Jaussen & Savignac 1909–1922.
JSNab	Nabataean inscriptions in Jaussen & Savignac 1909–1922.
JSTham	Thamudic inscriptions in Jaussen & Savignac 1909–1922.

⁴⁶ These are (initial and medial, not final, forms): (1) ʾ (2) b-t-t-y-n (3) g-h-h (4) d-d (5) r-z (6) s-š (7) š-d (8) t-z (9) ʿ-g (10) f (11) q (12) k (13) l (14) h (15) w (16) y.

⁴⁷ The twelve languages for which the Arabic script has at one time been used are: Arabic, Farsi, Fulani, Hausa, Kurdish, Malay, Ottoman Turkish, Pashtu, Sindhi, Swahili, Urdu, and Uyghur. See Daniels 1997.

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