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BRILL

ARABS AND ARABIC IN THE AGE OF THE PROPHET

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The linguistic conditions that prevailed in Arabia at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an are one of the most hotly debated issues among Arabists. The problem is important not only for the history of the Arabic language, but also for the understanding of the nature and original purpose of early Islamic preaching. It must be said from the very outset that there is no agreement among Arabists about the linguistic situation in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia. This also means that the linguistic status of the Qur'an itself is not univocally clear.

First, some basic facts: The language of the Qur'an, the *ʿArabiyya*, is a Semitic language with partly very archaic features. The phonology, syllable structure and morphology are generally seen as archaic and are, in many ways, close to Ugaritic and Akkadian, i.e., languages which were spoken in Syria and Mesopotamia in the second millennium BCE. Akkadian was spoken even later in Mesopotamia, but then in a form which had lost many of its ancient characteristics; it died out in the middle of the first millennium BCE at the latest. There has been a long debate among scholars about the time when the *ʿarabī* language ceased to be spoken, a discussion that still continues. One school claims that it was transformed into the predecessors of the modern dialects in connection with the Islamic conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries CE. This is also the traditional view among medieval Muslim linguists. Another school maintains that the transformation had started before the rise of Islam, at least in the border regions of the Fertile Crescent, and that the conquests only speeded up this process.[1] At the moment, it does not appear possible to give a definitive answer, yet a new suggestion will be given below.

It is however a fact that we have no clear traces of the *ʿArabiyya* in contemporary documents from pre-Islamic Arabia. We do have a large amount of mostly epigraphic pre-Islamic inscriptions, which

[1] For a summary of the discussion see Versteegh, *Arabic Language*, 46–51, 102–113.

amount to tens of thousands. The earliest documents whose language can be determined originate perhaps around 800 BCE, and this documentation continues until the sixth century CE. Among these, the texts from South Arabia give the most complete linguistic information, but the short inscriptions from other parts of Arabia provide at least a sketchy picture of the structure of the languages that they employ as well. We thus have linguistic documents from a period encompassing one and a half millennia before the rise of Islam. This material shows beyond any doubt that the linguistic situation in Arabia was variegated, exactly as it is today.[2] There are no traces of an Arabic language common to most inhabitants of the Peninsula during this period, and we have no reason to assume that such a language existed. From the sixth century CE we have a large corpus of poetry, which was created by poets from different parts of the Arabian Peninsula, yet is characterized by a highly unified linguistic form, and which in an unknown way was transmitted into the Islamic period until it was finally codified from the second Islamic century onwards. But we have no immediate reason to assume that the language of this poetry, the ʿArabiyya, was the commonly spoken language of Arabia. If this had been the case (and there are, admittedly, still scholars who think so[3]), it would presuppose a very special linguistic situation to have prevailed in Arabia, a situation unique to this age and which later on disappeared. If the ʿArabiyya was still spoken in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, it can only have been in parts of central and northern Arabia. It is much more likely that the *ʿarabī* poetry could be heard everywhere in Arabia during this period, just like today's tribal poetry, the *nabaṭī* poetry, whereas the everyday vernacular in most parts of the peninsula was different.

Several scholars would object to the claim that we have no real documentation of the ʿArabiyya from pre-Islamic times by referring to the inscription from Namāra in southern Syria, which is generally considered the earliest specimen of the ʿArabiyya language. There are, however, several reasons to be somewhat skeptical about this. That text, dated to the year 328 CE, is difficult to read. It is written in an Aramaic script, i.e., an alphabet with twenty-two consonantal signs. The ʿArabiyya contains twenty-nine consonants, which in many instances would make the inscription's reading doubtful even if we

[2] See Macdonald, "Reflections."

[3] See e. g. Versteegh, *Arabic Language*, 37, 93.

were able to read all words—which we are not, since it uses the Nabatean variant of the Aramaic script, in which many of the differences between the original twenty-two letters are difficult or even impossible to discern. There is no scholarly consensus about the reading of many words and expressions in the Namāra inscription, and we should be more cautious than is usually the case when we make judgments about its language and content.[4]

Something which has confused the discussion of the whole matter is the fact that the ʿArabiyya of the Qur'an, too, is written in a variant of the Aramaic script that probably derives from Nabatean.[5] Apart from the defective rendering of the consonants, the writing of the holy text also uses an idiosyncratic orthography which in more than a few cases does not reflect the ʿArabiyya but instead shows Aramaic features. A number of important elements of nominal morphology are thus not marked in this script. There is a salient discrepancy between the original orthography and the traditional oral reading of the holy text. Several decades after the first revelation, a system with diacritical signs was invented that aimed at mending the deficiencies of the Aramaic orthography and at reproducing the phonology and morphology of the ʿArabiyya of the Qur'an in a more exact way. This implied the introduction of diacritical signs in order to distinguish consonants whose shape had become similar, and to mark specific Arabic consonants not found in Aramaic. Diacritical signs were also introduced for the vowels and certain suffixes of the ʿArabiyya. This system, which probably was fully developed in the beginning of the eighth century, is still the norm when writing Arabic today. But we have no reason to assume that the Namāra inscription should be read in the same way as the Qur'an. There are three centuries between the two texts, and if we did not have the ʿArabiyya in Qur'anic orthography, no one would probably identify the language of the Namāra inscription with the ʿArabiyya. This also holds for a number of other pre-Islamic inscriptions, especially the so-called ʿEn ʿAvdat inscription from the Negev.[6] Another matter altogether is the fact that the

[4] For a survey of the different interpretations of this inscription see Retsö, *Arabs*, 467–470. One of the suggested translations is given by Versteegh, *Arabic Language*, 31.

[5] The basic study of the development of the Arabic script is Diem, "Untersuchungen." For a summary of his views see Diem, "Rise." Cf. also Gruendler, *Development*.

[6] For this text see Versteegh, *Arabic Language*, 32–35.

languages of these inscriptions are quite close relatives of the 'Arabiyya—they are similar, but not identical.

The fact is that the Qur'an uses an Aramaic orthography which is reminiscent of that of the Namāra inscription, and which does not render all the details of the structure of the 'Arabiyya. There is a difference between writing and reading or, to approach the Qur'anic terminology, between the writing, *al-kitāb*, and the recitation, *al-qur'ān*. The relationship between both is a fundamental theme in several surahs from the Meccan period. In Q 42:17 it is said that the writing (*al-kitāb*) has been sent down (*anzala*) to the ancestors of the listeners. The recitation (*al-qur'ān*), by contrast, has been "revealed" (*awḥā*) to the Prophet (Q 42:7). The listeners already possess *al-kitāb*, and the Prophet is to assure them that he subordinates himself to its authority (*wa-qul āmantu bi-mā anzala llāhu min kitābin*, Q 42:15).

Nothing of this is very transparent, and we should be cautious in assuming that we understand it right away. It is always important to keep in mind that those who want to arrive at an understanding of the Qur'an as a historical document should read it as if it were an epigraphic text from the early seventh century, and not through the lens of later Islamic interpretations. We should also keep in mind that terms like *kitāb* might have different meanings in different parts of the text. In the earliest parts, however, it seems clear that *kitāb* means "writing," just as in the oldest *'arabī* poetry, and not "book," as is usually assumed. According to the passage discussed above, the writing is of divine origin, which also must be the meaning of the famous passage Q 96:4–5: "God [...] who taught him [=man] [the use of] the pen, taught him what he did not know." God himself has taught mankind writing. The reading of what is written, that is, its recitation, is something else, but also of divine origin. It is very plausible that the mysterious letters introducing several surahs are examples of this divine writing. See, for example, Q 12:1: "'LR. These are the *āyāt* of the clear (? *mubīn*) Writing (*kitāb*)." Here, *āyāt* most likely means "letters" like the equivalent word in Aramaic and Hebrew, *āthā/ōt*.[7]

In these passages (Q 42:17 and Q 12:1) and several others, we find the expression *qur'ān 'arabī*, "an *'arabī* recitation," or *lisān 'arabī*, "an *'arabī* language." In Q 42 the *qur'ān* is a confirmation of the writing, or the *qur'ān* and the writing come from the same source, viz., the Lord, *ar-rabb*, or God, *Allāh*. The epithet *'arabī* occurs eleven times in the Meccan surahs. It always qualifies the *qur'ān*, the recitation, or the *lisān*, "the language" or perhaps "speech," that is, the oral performance of the text in the *'arabī* language. The epithet *'arabī* is thus connected not with the written, but with the oral form of the text—the text as pronounced, not as written.[8] The use of the word Arabic as a designation for the language of the Qur'an, the poetry and the literature of the Islamic Middle Ages originates from these passages.

It is important to emphasize that this does not automatically mean that the original text should be read as an Aramaic one, as has been claimed by Christoph Luxenberg. The addition to the consonantal text of signs indicating vowels does not imply that its Arabic pronunciation was invented. These signs were most likely introduced to codify an already existing Arabic reading tradition. Both the consonants and the vocalized version are undoubtedly Arabic, not Aramaic, and the readings suggested by Luxenberg do not constitute an improvement of the text.

When formulated this way, several questions arise: What is the meaning of *'arabī*? Why does the text have to state that its oral performance is *'arabī*? What does this teach us about the linguistic situation in pre-Islamic Arabia? In the following, answers to these questions will be suggested.

First, what is the meaning of *'arabī*, Arabic? The adjective is evidently derived from the word *'arab*, Arabs. When looking for the meaning of this word, we should first check the contemporary or pre-Qur'anic occurrences, not the later Islamic ones, and absolutely not the modern usage. Unfortunately, there are few occurrences of the word in sources contemporary with the Qur'an itself, and the few that exist are not very informative.[9] But the word occurs quite frequently in sources from pre-Islamic antiquity. The first occurrence is in an Assyrian text from ca. 853 BCE that is followed by more than 3000 instances in Assyrian, Hebrew, Greek, Persian, Latin, Aramaic/Syriac, and Ancient South Arabian texts reaching until shortly before

[7] For a survey of the debate about these letters, see the articles in Paret (ed.), *Der Koran*, 311–385.

[8] See Retsö, *Arabs*, 40–48.

[9] See Retsö, *Arabs*, 96–102. For a full survey of the contemporary testimonies see now Hoyland, *Islam*.

the appearance of the Prophet.[10] From these texts it is obvious what the word does *not* mean: it does not mean "nomad," "desert-dweller," or "Bedouin," and definitely does not refer to the members of an Arab "nation" in the modern sense. This is so for a variety of reasons: all the ancient languages have other special terms for the first two concepts, the classical Bedouin culture did not arise in Arabia until well after the turn of the era,[11] and the modern concept of nationhood probably did not exist before ca. 1750 CE.

Instead of the Arabs having been an ethnic group in the ordinary sense of the word (whatever that might be), the texts seem to point in another direction. In them we read that the Arabs did not live in houses built of stone, that they did not drink wine, that they did not cultivate the soil, that the hair on their foreheads was shaven, that they only worshipped two gods, that they appeared as assistants to divine or semi-divine heroes, and—last but not least—that they had a special relationship to the camel. This picture emerges from at least three of the longer texts: from Herodotus' *History* (fifth century BCE), from Diodorus Siculus (ca. 50 BCE), who reproduces an account by Hieronymus of Cardia written ca. 280 BCE, and, somewhat surprisingly, from a section in Nonnus' great epic *Dionysiaca* that was composed in the fifth century CE, yet borrows its description of the Arabs from a Greek work from ca. 400 BCE.[12] The picture also fits a host of other testimonies in the pre-Islamic sources. The characteristics enumerated above give the impression of ideological injunctions rather than expressions of a nomadic or Bedouin way of living.[13] The writer of these lines has suggested that the pre-Islamic Arabs originally were a religious-cultic institution rather than an ethnic group.[14] The existence of such groups is not altogether unique. In the Bible we hear about the Rechabites, whose way of life bears some interesting similarities to that of the pre-Islamic Arabs as described in the texts referred to above.[15] The tendency in modern scholarship has been to

[10] A full analysis of all relevant passages in these sources is given in Retsö, *Arabs*.
[11] See Bulliet, *Camel*, 7–110; Knauf, *Midian*, 9–15.
[12] Herodotus, *History* 1.131, 3.8 (Retsö, *Arabs*, 247); Diodorus, *Bibliotheca* 18.5–19.100 (Retsö, *Arabs*, 283–289); Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 20.142–21.325, cf. also 40.294–299 (Retsö, *Arabs*, 610–614).
[13] Retsö, *Arabs*, 577–595.
[14] See the discussion and summaries in Retsö, *Arabs*, 595–622.
[15] 2 Kgs 10:15–17; Jer 35.

view the Rechabites as some kind of guild and not as a survival of Israel's supposed "Bedouin" past.[16]

The picture of the Arabs as a community different from ordinary ethnic formations also occurs in the Arabo-Islamic sources dealing with early Islamic history. It turns out that the term stood for several different groups during the first Islamic century, and that its use was expansive: it was applied to more and more sections among the Islamic movement, until it came to encompass the entire group of Islamic warriors and finally, in the latter half of the Umayyad period, the Islamic community as a whole.[17] This expansion of the use of the term is also reflected in the non-Arabic sources from the early Islamic period.[18]

This picture is of course highly controversial, since it deviates from the common opinion of what the Arabs were and are. But it is easy to show that the common opinion is not based on a thorough analysis of the evidence, but instead merely tends to follow conventional concepts about the meaning of ethnic and similar terminology in ancient sources. If it were to turn out to be correct that the pre-Islamic Arabs originally were some kind of religious community, this would certainly shed new light on the question of the language of the Qur'an. It has often been assumed that the *ʿarabī* passages in the Qur'an function as a kind of legitimization of the ʿArabiyya as a language of revelation similar to Hebrew, Greek, and others, and thus endow it with a function it did not have before the appearance of Muhammad. However, support for this view from the holy text itself is meager. When the pertinent passages are read in their context, the use of this language for communicating revelations turns out to have quite a different function.

As has been pointed out, several different languages were spoken in pre-Islamic Arabia. If we choose to call these languages Arabic, this is of course perfectly legitimate. However, one must at least stop to ask if this terminology is compatible with that of pre-Islamic Arabia, or if the terminology back then might perhaps have been different. In fact, there are several instances in the pre-Islamic sources that point to the existence of a language called Arabic. Yet we do not know for sure which language is meant by these passages, only that

[16] Frick, "Rechab."
[17] Retsö, *Arabs*, 24–81.
[18] Retsö, *Arabs*, 96–102.

Arabic as the designation of a language was known in Arabia. Against this background it is interesting to observe that this language (or, perhaps, these languages) is/are mentioned primarily in a religious context.[19] This may be pure coincidence, but in the light of what the pre-Islamic Arabs seem to have been it may also be of crucial importance. A few illustrations will be sufficient. In the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a text from the first century CE describing the coasts of the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula and the sea route to India, we hear about "holy men" on the island of Sarapis off the coast of Oman who use "the Arabic language."[20] In Epiphanius' *Panarion*, a work from the beginning of the fourth century CE that surveys different kinds of heresies, we read that in the ceremonies of a pagan feast in Elusa in the Negev the "Arabic dialect" was employed.[21] Here, we are confronted with a language that is used in a religious context and is apparently named after a religious community. Pure coincidence? Let us now turn to the Qur'an itself. The opening verses of Q 12 and of Q 41 run as follows:

> 'LR. These are the signs (*āyāt*) of the clear Writing (*kitāb*). We have sent it down as an *'arabī* recitation (*qur'ān 'arabī*) so that you will get insight (*'aql*).
>
> ḤM. A sending-down (*tanzīl*) from the merciful, the compassionate. A writing whose signs (*āyāt*) have been distinguished (*fuṣṣilat*) as an *'arabī* recitation (*qur'ān 'arabī*) for people who know (*ya'lamūn*).

The meaning of the verb *fuṣṣilat*, which has been rendered as "distinguished," is not certain, and the syntactic coherence of the verses is much more obscure than most translations make it appear. In spite of this, the basic meaning is clear: the *'arabī* recitation will give the listeners insight and knowledge, and confirm their insight. Elsewhere (Q 41:44) the text says:

> Say: "It [=the recitation, *al-qur'ān*] is guidance and a healing for those who have become believers (*alladhīna āmanū*); and those who do not believe, in their ears is deafness and it is blindness for them."

The impression is that the recitation's revelation is directed to people who already possess a certain degree of insight and understanding. For them it is both a sign and a confirmation of what they already

[19] Retsö, "Das Arabische."
[20] *Periplus maris Erythraei*, par. 33 (= p. 167 of Casson's edition).
[21] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51.22.11.

have, as we have seen in the passage from Q 42 that was quoted above. This is even clearer in Q 26:192–199:

> Indeed, it is a sending-down (*tanzīl*) of the Lord of the world.
> The faithful spirit has sent it down,
> Upon your heart that you may be a warner
> In a clear *'arabī* language.
> Indeed, it is in the *zubur* of the ancients.
> Was it not a sign (*āya*) for them that the learned of the sons of Israel should know about it?
> If we had sent it down to some of the *a'jamūn*
> And had he recited it to them they would not have believed in it.

The "sending-down" (*tanzīl*) is the revelation of the reading. The divine voice draws a parallel between the revelation addressed to the Prophet and the previous one addressed to the Israelites. The expression *zubur* refers to some kind of ancient writings; it is now documented from pre-Islamic Yemen as the designation of writing in a special cursive South Semitic script used for letters and economic documents. The learned among the Israelites are capable of identifying the origins of this new revelation when it is in *'arabī* language. Thus, the Israelites have already received this revelation—in *'arabī* language, as it seems. Those who do not know this language, the *a'jamūn*, do not possess this ability, and do not understand that the current message has the same origin as the one given to the Israelites. There is no doubt that the word *a'jamūn* (plural of *'ajam*) refers to those who do not have a good command of the 'Arabiyya and might not even understand it. This is very clearly stated in the earliest Arabic dictionary from the end of the eighth century, al-Khalīl's *Kitāb al-'ayn* (s.v. 'JM):

> *'Ajam* is the opposite to *'arab*. An *a'jamī* is not an *'arabī*. The *a'jam* is someone who does not speak clearly.[22]

The meaning of all this seems to be that the revelation's being in Arabic is a sign or even a proof that it is a divine authority who speaks, not a human one. All the *'arabī* passages in the Qur'an seem to deal with the question of divine authority. The message is clear: the author of this text is *ar-rabb*, the Lord, or *Allāh*, one of the ancient gods of Arabia, not Muhammad or some other human being.

[22] This saying is repeated in later Arabic medieval dictionaries (see Retsö, "Das Arabische").

A hint of the context within which the *ʿarabī* language was used is found in Q 37:36:

> And they [the opponents of the Prophet] say: "Should we really abandon our gods for a *shāʿir majnūn*?"

Q 52:29–30 is also illuminating in this regard:

> So remind [them]; for you are, by the grace of your Lord, neither a *kāhin* or a *shāʿir*.
>
> Or they say: "He is a *shāʿir*! We shall wait for Fate to hit him!."

According to medieval Arabic lexicographers, historians and commentators, a *kāhin* is a soothsayer. The two words *shāʿir* and *kāhin* obviously designate different kinds of soothsayers or diviners, that is, people who were in contact with the divine world. The *shuʿarāʾ* are characterized in the oft-quoted verses Q 26:224–226:

> And as to the *shuʿarāʾ*, the perverse follow them.
> Have you not seen that they err in every valley
> And that they say what they do not do?

It is difficult to view these verses as a description of poets as it is usually done. Rendering *shuʿarāʾ* as "poets," which is of course its usual meaning in later Arabic, is another example of how later concepts distort the original text and its meaning. The key to the word's signification lies in the juxtaposition of *kāhin* and *shāʿir*: both words designate a group of people who transmit messages from the spiritual world. The opponents of the prophet must have had at least some kind of pretext to view him as belonging to these categories, even if Muhammad's message was far more sophisticated both in form and content than those preserved from the *kuhhān*. It does not seem too far-fetched to suggest that the immediate reason for this was Muhammad's use of the *ʿarabī* language. We have already seen that there are testimonies that a language called Arabic was used in a religious and cultic context. This is also evident from the Qur'an itself. If it is admitted that the Arabs themselves, after whom the language was after all named, were a kind of religious community, it becomes possible to discern a connection. Were there special groups of soothsayers and diviners among the pre-Islamic Arabs? Already in the first

century BCE, Cicero knew that the Arabs were well known as experts on divination and ornithomancy, referred to in Arabic as *ʿiyāfa*.[23]

This connection between the soothsayers and diviners with whom the Prophet was associated by his opponents, on the one hand, and the pre-Islamic Arabs, on the other, is admittedly not completely clear. But the most important thing they had in common seems to have been their use of a language that was named after the Arabs. This indicates that the *shuʿarāʾ* and the *kuhhān* did in fact belong to the Arabs. The *ʿarabī* language did not necessarily sound identical in every part of Arabia where there were soothsayers. It is nevertheless likely that everywhere it had a structure which deviated from the everyday vernacular tongue, the *ʿajamī*. The word *ʿajamī* is derived from a root meaning "crooked" and refers to linguistic inabilities of different kinds. Later, it took on the meaning of "foreigner" and was applied especially to Iranians. The use of a language deviating from the everyday vernacular by shamans and soothsayers is a phenomenon known from other parts of the world and would thus not be unique to Arabia.[24] Another story is the fact that already in pre-Islamic times, this language had, in certain sections of society, liberated itself from its sacral functions and had begun to be used for secular purposes like political speeches and non-religious heroic poetry, a development which, as we know, was to have enormous consequences for the cultural history of the world. It is well worth noting that according to the Qur'an, the term designating a professional user of this poetic language, that is, a *shāʿir* ("poet" in later Arabic) actually had more or less the same meaning as *kāhin*.

[23] Cicero, *De divinatione* 1.42. A similar remark is found in Clement of Alexandria's and Philostratus' biography of the first-century ascetic Apollonius (see Retsö, *Arabs*, 594).

[24] Cf. Eliade, *Chamanisme*, 91–93.

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