

طُرُقُ التِّجَارَةِ الْقَدِيمَةِ



ROADS

ROADS OF ARABIA



OF

ARABIA

ARCHÄOLOGISCHE SCHÄTZE  
AUS SAUDI-ARABIEN



ISBN 978-3-88609-721-0

Museum für  
Islamische Kunst  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Das archäologische Erbe des Königreichs Saudi-Arabien wird mit der Ausstellung von ca. 400 einzigartigen Artefakten erstmals in Deutschland präsentiert. Faszinierende Funde von den ersten Faustkeilen, 6000 Jahre alten anthropomorphen Stelen, kolossalen ägyptisierenden Statuen über die römische Antike mit feinen Glas- und Metallarbeiten, bis zur islamischen Frühzeit. Hervorzuheben sind spektakuläre Objekte der Kaaba und der Stadtgeschichte von Mekka. Als roter Faden ziehen sich Handels- und Pilgerrouen durch die Ausstellung, entlang derer über Jahrtausende kultureller Austausch stattfand. Dieses Begleitbuch dient als Katalog und bietet die entsprechenden Hintergrundinformationen.

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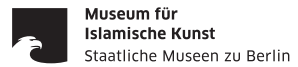
ARABIA

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Islamische Kunst  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

## Roads of Arabia



# **ROADS OF ARABIA**

**The Archaeological Treasures of Saudi Arabia**



**Wasmuth**



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### Exhibition

#### Conception and scientific preparation

Stefan Weber, Joachim Gierlichs, Ute Franke

#### Management and organisation

Stefan Weber, Ute Franke

#### Coordination

Dorte Riemenschneider

#### Exhibition architecture

Youssef El Khoury

#### Conservation supervision in Berlin

Stephanie Fischer, Anna Beselin, Christiane Moslé, Burkhard Draßdow

#### Exhibition graphics

Interior Interactive Network, Manfred Schulz, Ana Frotscher, Hagen Thiel  
Roula El Khoury Saliba

#### Exhibition logistics

André Chenue S.A. art transportation and handling, Paris

#### Exhibition construction and technology

Bel-Tec-Gesellschaft für Film-, Theater- und Ausstellungsbau mbH  
Stefan Kuhlmann, Elke Stehle, Hauke Tensfeldt

#### Exhibition texts

Ute Franke, Joachim Gierlichs, Stefan Weber, as well as Arnulf Hausleiter,  
Michael Marx, Stefan Maneval and Barbara Kellner-Heinkele

#### Museum education

Karin Schmidl, Visitor Services, National Museums in Berlin  
Michael von Petrykowski, Piranha Kultur GmbH  
Illka Krempel-Eichmann, Holger Kühn

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### Catalogue

#### Editors

Ute Franke, Joachim Gierlichs  
in collaboration with Sophia Vassilopoulou and Lucia Wagner

#### Publication management for the National Museums in Berlin

Elisabeth Rochau-Shalem

#### Publication coordination

Sven Haase

#### Authors of the catalogue texts

Hiba Abid, Muhammad Tayeb Al-Ansari, Ali Al-Ghabban, Mahmud Al-Hijri, Said Al-Said, Abdullah S. Al-Saud, Fahd A. Al-Simari, Abdulrahman 'Awad bin Ali Al-Sibali Al-Zahrani, Helmut Brückner, Philipp Drechsler, Ricardo Eichmann, Youssef El Khoury, Max Engel, Barbara Finster, Ute Franke, Malte Fuhrmann, Joachim Gierlichs, Arnulf Hausleiter, Barbara Kellner-Heinkele, Michael Marx, Karoline Meßenzehl, Laila Nehmé, Uwe Pfullmann, Daniel Thomas Potts, Stefan Weber

#### Editing and proof-reading

Sigrid Hauser, Ernst Wasmuth Verlag

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Rosa Wagner, Ernst Wasmuth Verlag

#### English translations

beyond words, Düsseldorf; Linda Schilcher; Walter S. Chahanovich

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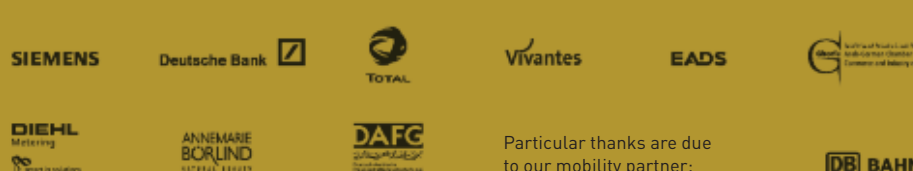
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**Curators of the Berlin exhibition**

Stefan Weber, Director Museum of Islamic Art

Ute Franke, Deputy Director Museum of Islamic Art

Joachim Gierlichs, Guest curator.

General Notes

Dates without any additional information refer to the Gregorian calendar and are *Anno Domini* (AD). Dates followed by 'AH' (after *Hijra*) follow the Islamic moon calendar, which is approximately 11 days shorter per year than the Gregorian calendar, and begins with the migration (*Hijra*) of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from Mecca to Medina in 1 AH/622 AD.

In the public interest we have dispensed with a scientifically based transcription in favour of improved legibility. Instead, Arab and Persian names and *termini* are represented in a simplified transcription based on the most commonly adopted English transcription method. *Hamza* and *Ain* are indicated by a small superscript line. The exception is the article on '*Writing Systems and Languages of Arabia*', where a scientifically based transcription of old-Arabic script systems was essential. Standing English terminology or names are retained.

Bibliographic references are kept to a minimum, the abridged titles are resolved in the bibliography at the end of the book.

It was not possible to feature images of all the exhibits in this publication, which was designed as a companion volume. The numbering of the object images distributed among the essays and the catalogue is therefore not always in a continuous sequence.

Cover illustrations

Anthropomorphic stele, 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, sandstone, 92 × 21 cm, Riyadh National Museum, 997  
Design: Lena Roob

Picture credits

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Table 1: The Sabaic Alphabet

Transcription Sabaic		Transcription Sabaic	
h	𐩦	ś	𐩨𐩬
l	𐩦	f	𐩨
ḥ	𐩦	ʾ	𐩨
m	𐩦	‘	𐩨
q	𐩦	d	𐩨
w	𐩦	g	𐩨
ś	𐩦	d	𐩨
r	𐩦	ḡ	𐩨
b	𐩦	ṭ	𐩨
t	𐩦	z	𐩨
s	𐩦	ḡ	𐩨
k	𐩦	y	𐩨
n	𐩦	ṭ	𐩨
ḥ	𐩦	z	𐩨
ś	𐩦		

Stein 2010

Table 2: The Nabataean Alphabet

Transcription Imperial Aramaic Nabataean			Transcription Imperial Aramaic Nabataean		
ʾ	𐩦	𐩦	l	𐩦	𐩦
b	𐩦	𐩦	m	𐩦	𐩦
g	𐩦	𐩦	n	𐩦	𐩦
d	𐩦	𐩦	s	𐩦	𐩦
h	𐩦	𐩦	‘	𐩦	𐩦
w	𐩦	𐩦	p	𐩦	𐩦
z	𐩦	𐩦	ś	𐩦	𐩦
ḥ	𐩦	𐩦	q	𐩦	𐩦
ṭ	𐩦	𐩦	r	𐩦	𐩦
y	𐩦	𐩦	ś	𐩦	𐩦
k	𐩦	𐩦	t	𐩦	𐩦

following Healey 1993: 293–295

Michael Marx

Writing Systems and Languages of Arabia – A Tour<sup>1</sup>

Introduction

The exhibition ‘*Roads of Arabia*’ offers insights into the cultural environment of ancient Arabia. For historians there is a rich treasure of thousands of mostly stone and bronze inscriptions written in the four Ancient South Arabian languages (Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, Hadramitic) that can help us to understand the civilisation that existed between 800 BC and 600 AD in south-western Arabia. In North Arabia numerous Ancient North Arabian inscriptions from between the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD document the writing cultures of the oases Dedan, Duma, and Tayma’. Tens of thousands North Arabian inscriptions, and in particular those written by nomads, are evidence of writing systems that once stretched from Syria to Yemen. The Ancient North Arabian languages and pre-Islamic Arabic – the latter predominantly an oral tradition – are closely related. Together they constitute the Central Semitic group of the Semitic language family. In contrast, the Ancient South Arabian languages are grouped, along with the Ethiopian languages, into the South Semitic group. Both the Ancient South and Ancient North Arabian languages were written in a distinct South Semitic alphabet. This alphabet and the Northwest Semitic alphabet – the latter traced back to the Egypto-Syrian cultural realm of the second millennium – developed out of a shared ancestral alphabet. Whereas almost all of the known alphabets (Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Greek, Latin, etc.) trace their origins back to the Northwest Semitic alphabet, only the South Semitic alphabet survived in the Arabian Peninsula and the neighbouring areas. Today, this alphabet is still used in a modified form for writing the Classical and Modern Ethiopian languages (e.g. Amharic). Also, some inscriptions in non-Arabian languages and scripts (Akkadian, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, etc.) have been found in Arabia. These are evidence of the breadth of relations stretching out of the region and into Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine, and the heart of the Roman Empire. But the inscriptions in stone and bronze are practically the only medium by which we can derive knowledge about the linguistic geography of the peninsula in antiquity. In addition to these relatively resistant writing materials, there is only a small amount of evidence found in other written media. Papyrus, leather, parchment or textiles (linen and cotton) are reported to have been used in large numbers, but in most cases have not survived through the ages – with some exceptions: In the Yemeni oasis Nashan (al-Sawda) for example, an entire archive has been found. This archaeological cache comprises thousands of wooden sticks on which administrative texts, lists and other documents are written in the quotidian cursive Sabaic letters of the time.

### Ancient South Arabian

These inscriptions provide us with only a cursory view into the living environment of the peninsula: a Minaic bronze inscription recounts that two traders presented offerings from their own wares to the gods Athtar Dhu Qabd and Wadd Shahrān (Fig. 1). The bronze sheet is written in the South Arabian alphabet, which is composed of 29 consonants and, like most Semitic languages, does not include any vowels. It is important to note that the South Semitic alphabet system has a unique writing form and the ordering of its alphabet is distinct from that of the Northwest Semitic alphabet. The first series starts *h, l, ḥ, m* ... in contrast to *a, b, g, d* ... (cf. Table 'The Sabaic Alphabet'). The bronze plaque from Qaryat al-Faw, most likely set up in a sanctuary, also lists a deity (Wadd) that is mentioned in the Quran, Surā 71: 23. Specifically, in this verse the deity of the inscription is included in a group of other gods worshipped at the time of the Prophet Noah. A rainspout dedicated to the god Dhu Samawi from the great temple of Najran also demonstrates the cultic-religious world of Arabia. The inscription, written in the Sabaic language, records the endowment of two rain gutters and other offerings to the god worshipped in the temple (Fig. 2).

### Ancient North Arabian

The locations of tens of thousands of Ancient North Arabian inscriptions are spread geographically from Yemen to Syria. Inscriptions written by nomads are attributed to the subgroups Safaitic (in today's Syria, northeast Jordan, Saudi Arabia) and Himaic (in the desert between Jordan and Saudi Arabia); the yet unclassified Ancient North Arabian nomadic rock inscriptions and graffiti in the region between Syria and Yemen are labeled as 'Thamudic'.

Ancient North Arabian inscriptions found in modern-day Saudi Arabia document early writing cultures of the inhabitants of the Dedan (modern-day al-'Ula), Duma (modern-day al-Jawf), and Tayma' oases. The small number of professional and monumental inscriptions is concentrated in the oasis city of Dedan. Other inscriptions, in addition to those found in the oasis such as Figs. 3 and 4, reveal to us specific aspects of cultural life in the region. For example, Fig. 4 (5<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC) records the consecration and presentation of a statue to the god Dhu Ghabat worshipped in Dedan. Thus, in the oases one is presented with proof of literate societies that used writing for official and public purposes. Yet the question remains: To what extent can we really consider the nomadic tribes, in light of the great number of Ancient North Arabian rock inscriptions and graffiti, as literate societies? The numerous examples of graffiti certainly cannot serve as proof that these nomadic tribes socially organised themselves through the act of writing. Nevertheless, these findings do reveal that many people used script, even if this was done mostly for private and unofficial purposes, i.e. as individual memorial inscriptions or declarations of love, often accompanied by drawings and tribal markings (Fig. 5).

The epigraphic texts of the Arabian Peninsula come almost entirely from its western two-thirds, whereas in eastern Arabia almost no inscriptions in Arabian languages are known; a few dozen gravestones from the al-Hasa' province and from southern Iraq are the exception. These inscriptions are composed in an Ancient North Arabian idiom, called Hasaitic, and are written in a discrete variant of the Ancient South Arabian alphabet (see article by D. T. Potts, Fig. 13).

### Cultural Contacts as Reflected through Inscriptions

In Bahrain (in Sumerian/Akkadian known as Dilmun; in Greek as Tylos) and on Failaka (Greek: Ikaros), an island off the coast of Kuwait, Akkadian texts written in Cuneiform script have been found as well as documents and artefacts from the Hellenic period (coins, bronze plaques, clay vessels) in Aramaic and Greek. Syriac Church chronicles, which document correspondence between church leaders in Iraq and bishops in the coastal region of East Arabia (Syriac: Beth Qatraye), attest to the use of Aramaic in East Arabia.

The inscribed stele from Tayma' (Fig. 6) takes us back into an epoch, during which Aramaic was used as an administrative language in the neo-Babylonian and Persian Empires and can be described as having been the communicative currency of the Near East (Imperial Aramaic). Symbols of the planet-gods – the Sun, Moon, and Venus – depicted above the inscription on the stele are reminiscent of Mesopotamian stone border markings from the middle- and neo-Babylonian periods. These inscriptions can be traced back to the time of the last Babylonian King Nabonidus, who had conquered the Tayma' oasis and settled there (c. 550–540 BC).

The influence of the Aramaic language is also discernible among the Nabataeans, who – starting around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC – became economically and politically powerful by means of the caravan trade between South Arabia and the Mediterranean. In the Nabataean Empire in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC a distinct writing system emerged that was derived from the 22 letters of the Imperial Aramaic alphabet (cf. Table 'The Nabataean Alphabet'). Diglossia is characteristic of the Nabataean's linguistic situation. Specifically, the Aramaic language was used for written communication in addition to day-to-day spoken Arabic. The Imperial Aramaic inscription of a 'Funerary stele with human face' from Tayma' (Fig. 7) reveals the Arabic name of the deceased: *Taym bar Zayd* ('Taym, son of Zayd').

Even the Nabataean superscript on an incense burner (Fig. 8) documents an Arabic name: 'Abd al-Kattab, the diglossia being all the more clear with the employment of the Arabic definite article 'al'. Even the word for 'incense burner' (Nabat.: *mgmr*) is derived from the Arabic word *mijmar*. Another example of diglossia is demonstrated by Bishop Epiphanius (315–403 AD), who remarks that the Nabataeans sing hymns in Arabic language 'to their god Dusares and to the virgin who gave birth to him'.

Only one of the few Greek inscriptions found on the island of Tarut al-Rufaya (off the eastern coast of Arabia) – which suggest the presence of Greek-speaking traders – comes to us from the Hellenic Age (Fig. 9). A Latin inscription (Fig. 11), composed in honour of Caesar Marcus Aurelius and found in Hegra [Mada'in Salih, today located in northern Saudi Arabia], provides us with official documentation that the city was once a part of the Roman Empire. Other official Latin inscriptions from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD have been identified on the Farasan Islands in the Red Sea. These findings are again proof of a Roman presence in the Nabataean empire which was annexed by Caesar Trajan in 106 AD.

### The Arabic Language and the Development of Distinct Arabic Writing

Despite the evidence we have of Arabic names, loanwords, and occasional appearance of other Arabic elements in the Ancient North and Ancient South Arabian languages, only a meagre collection of complete Old Arabic texts have been found. Among these texts, we have inscriptions in Arabic written in Ancient South

Arabian or Nabataean script. An epigraph in Ancient South Arabian script from Qaryat al-Faw (Fig. 10) counts as one of the oldest historical documents in Old Arabic; this text, following inconclusive palaeographic clues, can only be dated approximately to the first century BC.

Scripts discovered above rock-cut tombs from Hegra [JSNab 17] from the year 267 AD contain a Nabataean text composed in a mixed language of Arabic-Aramaic, seeming to suggest the author made up for his poor knowledge of Aramaic with Arabic syntax and vocabulary. A very short vertically-running inscription in Thamudic (Ancient North Arabian) on the right margin of the inscription [JSTham 1] mentions the name of the deceased person (Fig. 12). The Nabataean-Thamudic double inscription on the grave of Raqush bint 'Abd Manat is another example of the historical reality of a multilingual Arabia (and in two different alphabets at that!).

In the period ranging from approx. the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, combinations of letters in the Nabataean script increasingly developed, a fact one may observe in the cursive writing of the later Arabic script. Letter-forms of a discrete Arabic script developed out of the script used in the region under the former Nabataean empire. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD these new letters were used in some inscriptions in Syria (inscriptions from Zabad, Jabal Usais, Harran, etc.); interestingly, one may observe here that the Aramaic word for son, *'bar*', and not the Arabic *'ibn/bin*', was used. It is still unclear to what extent the cursive Aramaic script written by Syriac Christians contributed to the development from Late Nabataean to Arabic. It is evident, however, that early Arabic stone epigraphs of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD were composed in a cultural atmosphere heavily influenced by Christianity and in which Greek and Syriac were still written.

### The New Status of the Arabic Language

The Arabic mosaic inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (691–92 AD) and the Quranic parchment manuscripts of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD signal the crystallisation of a new Arab cultural identity. Evidence of this new identity emerges already in the first, very few Arabic stone inscriptions of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the almost exclusively orally transmitted pre-Islamic Arabic poetry (the latter only became systematically codified in writing in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD). The rise and consolidation of Arabic and the new Arab identity had a political element as well: upon the decree of the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik, Arabic became the sole administrative language of the first Arab Empire in 77 AH/696–97 AD.

The standardised, yet awe inspiring, Kufi script (Fig. 13, 14) reveals the status that the Quranic text had accrued in Islamic culture. The pages with this script contain almost no additional symbols (i.e. dots) to differentiate between the letters; the vocalisation (*a, i, u*) is written with red dots over, on, and under the line. The epitaph on the tombstone (Fig. 15) of Hasa bint Musa is written in a clear, sober, and delicately composed script, an example of the Early Arabic lapidary Kufic script. By contrast, we see that another gravestone (Fig. 16) from a later time (1217 AD) is written in the Arabic script commonly used today with diacritical marks and vocalisation symbols.

### Inscriptions and Literature

Grave texts, inscriptions commemorating initiation, construction inscriptions or even Roman memorial inscriptions open up a window onto the history of writing systems and languages of pre-Islamic Arabia. Yet this is a window that leaves many

questions unanswered. Expressive formulations of linguistic creativity in poetry and prose, longer literary texts, epics and folk tales, technical or philosophical texts do not lend themselves well to the art of inscription. So far, only two inscribed poetic texts are the exception to the rule: one inscription in Qaniya near Sana'a (c. 200 AD) records a Sabaic sun hymn, the 27 verses of which [rhymed on the final letters *-hk*] constitute one of the oldest rhymed texts. From around the same time we have a second Nabataean-Arabic poetic inscription from En Avdat in the Negev Desert. Even though the Arabic language is found in other writings and languages of Arabia as foreign words, loanwords, tribal and individual names in the first pre-Christian millennium, the language itself was first codified in written form starting in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Thereafter, the Arabic language gained a new religious and political status by way of the Quran and the Umayyad Empire.

In the late 8<sup>th</sup> century AD Old Arabic poetry was finally written down. This corpus of literature has since served as a comprehensive compendium of literary material, a key to understanding the world of the Arabs before Islam. The odes [*qasa'id*, sing. *qasida*] provide a picture of the heroism, hospitality, as well as the pessimism of pre-Islamic tribal culture, one that pre-eminently accentuated the destructive powers of time. As for prose, there is the example of the genre *Ayyam al-Arab* [lit. 'Days of the Arabs'] in which one may read reports of pre-Islamic tribes and their adventures as marauding bandits and battle-ready warriors. Students of Arabic rhetoric and language would study the Old Arabic proverbs and collections of idioms, as well as mystical formulas of the pre-Islamic fortune-tellers (Arab.: *kuhhan*, sing. *kahin*).

It is hoped that the reference made here to this collective memory in the form of pre-Islamic Arabic oral texts – a tradition also included in the rubric of Islamic theology and jurisprudence – has demonstrated a central benchmark in the civilisational history of the Arabs and the Arabian Peninsula. The importance of this benchmark cannot be understood only by way of the lexicographical needs of Quranic exegesis. As paradoxical as it might seem: Islamic scholarship of the Arab epoch gave the pagan pre-Islamic epoch – often classified as the epoch of ignorance (Arab.: *Jahiliyya*) – importance as a central reference point of the Arabic-Islamic tradition. Though the oral tradition of this comprehensive Arabic-poetic archive does not lend itself well to description by means of archaeology – how can the spoken word be excavated?! – it is clear that this point should not be left out of the scope of history.

The inscriptions in this exhibition cover three millennia of the history of writing and language. They bring to light the cultural atmosphere of Antiquity. From among the examples exhibited here, it should be noted that Arabic alone in both its classical form and its dialects is still used as the spoken and written language of the Arabian Peninsula. Even if a comprehensive history of the Arabic language has yet to be written, the exhibition *'Roads of Arabia'* illustrates the breadth of the relevant source material that must be considered for the history of the Arabic language.

1 Michael C. A. Macdonald, Laila Nehmé and Christian Robin are thanked for their numerous informative suggestions, their patience and assistance. Thanks go also to David Kiltz and Ismail Mohr.



Fig. 1 Minaic inscription  
Obj. No. 137  
c. 3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century BC  
Bronze  
17.5 × 15.5 cm  
Qaryat al-Faw  
Department of Archaeology Museum,  
King Saud University, Riyadh, 262F8

Transcription:	Translation:
1 Rgyd / bn / Qšmʿl	1 Rugaid, son of Qašamaʿil,
2 w-šfyn / bn / Mrd	2 and Šufyān, son of Murād
3 ḡ-Ḍbr / šlʿy / w-s=	3 Ḍū Dabr, have consecrated and giv-
4 qny / ʿṭr / ḡ-Qb=	4 en <to the god> ʿAṭtar Ḍū Qab-
5 ḡ / w-Wd <sup>m</sup> / Šhr <sup>n</sup> /	5 ḡ and <the god> Waddum Šahrān
6 sqny <sup>n</sup> / ḡt / ʿ=	6 this sacrifice, ta-
7 ḡḡ / ʿhly-smn /	7 ken from their own wares
8 b-mqšm / b-Gntn	8 from the market in the oasis [Gannatān].

Transl.: M. Marx & C. Robin



Fig. 2 “Gutter” with inscription  
Obj. No. 222  
c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD  
Bronze  
9.5 × 53 × 7.5 cm  
[H. of the letters 5 cm]  
Najran  
National Museum, Riyadh, 1327

Transcription:	Translation:
...] qny / ḡ-Smwy / ʿdy / Kʿbt <sup>n</sup> / ḡfnhn / bn / frʿt / frʿ-hw / ornament/symbol	... has dedicated to Ḍū Samāwī at the great temple <in Najran> [Sabaic: <i>Kaʿbatan</i> , lit., ‘stone plinth, carved stone massif’] the two rain gutters together with tributes, that he has brought him.

Transl.: M. Marx & C. Robin



Fig. 3 Inscription in Dedanite script  
Obj. No. 121  
5<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century BC  
Red sandstone  
23 × 14 cm  
al-ʿUla  
Department of Archaeology Museum, King Saud University, Riyadh, 169D1

Transcription:	
...]Ddn bn...	
...]ʿlyrb...	
...]ʿlbyd	

The contents of the inscription are unclear; *Ddn* is a person’s name (this is confirmed in other South und North Arabian inscriptions), followed by *bn*, which means ‘son’.



Fig. 4 Stele with Dedanite dedication to the God Dhu Ghabat  
Obj. No. 122  
5<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century BC  
Red sandstone  
86 × 37 × 30 cm  
al-ʿUla  
Department of Archaeology Museum,  
King Saud University, Riyadh, 338D5

Transcription:	Translation:
[...]	[... and]
1 h-šyḡ h-=	1 the artisan
2 wdq h-m=	2 have presented this
3 mṭlt l-ḡ-=	3 statue
4 ḡbt f-r=	4 to the [god] Ḍū Ḡābāt, may he
5 ḡyhm	5 be pleased with them.

Transl.: M. Marx & M. C. A. Macdonald  
cf. Paris Catalogue 2010: 284

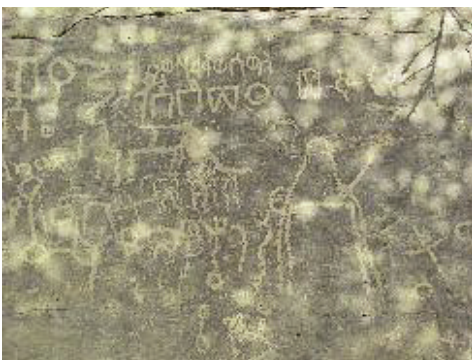


Fig. 5 Graffiti in Ancient North Arabian script  
a. Graffiti in Thamudic script from the Region of al-ʿUla  
Names and declarations of love; drawings  
Photo: P. Piérard  
b. Graffiti in South Thamudic script from the Region of Bīʿr Hima  
(southern Saudi Arabia)  
Names and declarations of love; tribal marks  
Photo: M. C. A. Macdonald





Fig. 6 al-Hamra stele with Imperial Aramaic inscription  
Obj. No. 104  
c. 4<sup>th</sup> century BC  
Sandstone  
45 × 16 × 102 cm  
Tayma', Qasr al-Hamra, Room 1  
National Museum, Riyadh, 1020

**Transcription:**

1 [šnt ... bbyr]t tym<sup>2</sup>  
2 [h]qym psgw šhrw br  
3 [m]lky lhy n h'ly by[t]  
  
4 [š]lm zy rb wmrhbbh w-  
5 [h]qym krs<sup>22</sup> znh qdm  
6 šlm zy rb lmytb šngl<sup>2</sup>  
7 w'sym<sup>2</sup> 'lhy tym<sup>2</sup>  
8 lhyy npš psgw  
9 šhrw wzr<sup>2</sup>h mr<sup>2</sup>[y<sup>2</sup>]

10 [w]l[h]yy npšh zy [lh]

**Translation:**

1 [In the year ... in the city of] Tayma'  
2 Paḏigū Šahrū constructed, the son  
3 of the royal official from Lihyān Ha'lay,  
the Temple  
4 of Šalm of Rabb and his width and  
5 constructed this throne in front of  
6 Šalm of Rabb as a pedestal for Sengallā  
7 and Ašimā, the gods of Tayma',  
8 for the life of Paḏigū's soul  
9 Šahrū and (for the life of) his heirs,  
[of the] men,  
10 [and] for the life of their own soul.

Transl. following Beyer & Livingstone 1987: 286



Fig. 8 Incense burner with Nabataean inscription  
Obj. No. 111  
1<sup>st</sup> century BC  
Sandstone  
20 × 13 × 44 cm  
Tayma', stray find  
Saudi-German Archaeological Mission  
Tayma' Museum, 3415

**Transcription:**

1 mgmr 'bd'ktb  
2 br bwlñ

**Translation:**

1 Incense altar of 'Abd al-Kattāb  
2 son of Bolan

Transl.: M. C. A. Macdonald & M. Marx  
cf. Beyer & Livingstone 1987: 292



Fig. 9 Stele with Greek inscription  
Obj. No. 228  
3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century BC  
Limestone  
29 × 42 × 9 cm  
Tarut, al-Rufaya  
National Museum, Riyadh, 1289

**Greek Text:**

ABEIBHA NOYMA  
XAIPE

**Translation:**

Ḥabīb'īl (to) Nu'mā,  
hail!

Greek text and transl.: D. Kiltz  
Paris Catalogue 2010: 384

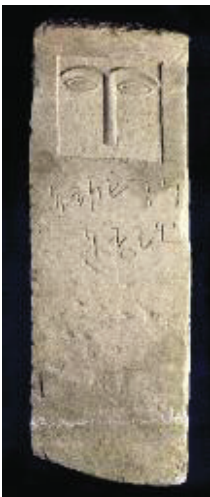


Fig. 7 'Eye-stele' with human face and Imperial Aramaic inscription  
Obj. No. 107  
5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century BC  
Sandstone  
26 × 15 × 72 cm  
Tayma', stray find  
Tayma' Museum, T/M/119

**Transcription:**

1 npš tym  
2 br zyd

**Translation:**

1 Tomb [lit. 'soul'] of Taym,  
2 son of Zayd

Paris Catalogue 2010: 256;  
Beyer & Livingstone 1987: 289



Fig. 10 Funerary stele with Arabian inscription in Ancient South Arabian script  
Obj. No. 132  
Late 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC  
Limestone  
60 × 48 × 13 cm  
Qaryat al-Faw  
National Museum, Riyadh, 887

**Transcription:**

1 'gl / bn / Hf<sup>m</sup> / bn / l-<sup>2</sup>h-h /  
Rbbl / bn H=  
2 f<sup>m</sup> / qbr / w-l-hw / w-l-wld-  
hw / w-m=  
3 r<sup>2</sup>t-h / w-wld-hw / w-wld /  
wld-hm  
4 w-nsy-hm / hryr / qw 'l /  
Glwn / f-  
5 'q-h / b-Khl / w-Lh / w-<sup>c</sup>tr  
6 'šrq / mn / 'zz<sup>m</sup> / w-wnym /  
w-  
7 šry<sup>m</sup> / w-mrthnm / 'b<sup>d</sup>m  
8 bn / wks<sup>m</sup> / 'd-ky / tm<sup>t</sup>=  
9 r / 'smy / dm / w-l-<sup>2</sup>r=  
10 q / š<sup>r</sup>

**Translation:**

1 'Igl, son of Höfa'amm built for his brother Rabibīl, son of Hö-  
2 fa'amm <this> grave, for him, for his children and his  
3 wife and for his children and for his children's children  
4 and for their wives, from the noble family of Ġalwān. Then  
5 he called Kahl and <Al>lāh and 'Aṭṭar  
6 aš-Šariq to help him against everyone, strong and weak, and  
7 those who have given and taken a pledge,  
8 for all time, as long as ra-  
9 ins [fall from] the heavens and the ear-  
10 th is covered with grass.

Transl.: M. Marx & C. Robin



Fig. 11 Latin inscription  
Obj. No. 123  
175–177 AD  
Sandstone  
110.5 × 60 × 12 cm  
Mada'in Salih, found by D. Al-Talhi 2003  
Mada'in Salih, 38/W28

#### Latin Text:

- 1 Pro salute Imp(eratoris)  
Caesaris M(arci) Aureli
- 2 Antonini Aug(usti),  
Armeniacy, Parth[ic]i, Me-
- 3 dici, Germanici, Sarmatici  
Maxim[i] v[al(?)]-
- 4 lum vetustate dilabsum (!)  
civitas He-
- 5 grenorum suis impendi  
[s re]stituit sub
- 6 Iulio Firmiano leg(ato)  
Au(gusti) pr(o) pr(aetore),  
instan[tib(us)]
- 7 operi Pomponio Victore  
(centurione) leg(ionis) III  
Cyr(enaicae) et N[u]-
- 8 misio Clemente collegae(!)  
eius cur[am]
- 9 agente operarum Amro  
Haianis pri-
- 10 mo civitatis eorum.

#### Translation:

- 1 To the welfare of Caesar Marcus  
Aurelius
- 2 Antoninus Augustus, (great) victor over  
the Armenians, Parthians, Me-
- 3 des, Germans, Sarmatians:
- 4 the fortress wall, that had collapsed due  
to its age, has [been by] the community
- 5 of the Hegrens (civitas Hegrenorum)  
restored and paid for
- 6 under the proconsul [of Caesar,  
endowed with praetorian authority]  
Iulius Firmanus. Assiduously
- 7 carried out was the project [by] Pompo-  
nius Victor, centurion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cyrene  
Legion and Nu-
- 8 misius Clemens, his colleague; oversight
- 9 of the work was undertaken by Amrus  
Haianis [arab.: 'Amr b. Hayyān],
- 10 the first from his community.

Transl.: M. Marx & M. G. Schmitt; cf. Paris Catalogue 2010:  
304; Al-Talhi & Al-Daire 2005; Speidel 2007



Fig. 12 Rock inscriptions JSNab 17 and JSTham 1  
Hegra (Mada'in Salih)  
Photo: Mada'in Salih Archaeological Project  
Facsimile: Laila Nehmé  
both from: Nehmé 2010

#### JSNab 17: Ancient Arabic in Late Nabataean script

##### Transcription:

- 1 dnh qbrw ṣn'h k'bw br
- 2 ḥrtt l-rqwš brt
- 3 'bdmnnwtw 'mh w-hy
- 4 hlkt py 'l-ḥgrw
- 5 šnt m'h w-štn
- 6 w-tryn byrh tmwz w-l'n
- 7 mry 'lm' mn yšn' 'l-qbrw
- 8 d['] w-mn ypthh ḥšy w-
- 9 wldh w-l'n mn yqbr w-{y}'ly mnh

##### Translation:

- 1 This is the grave that was prepared by  
Ka'b, son
- 2 of Hāritat for Raqūš, daughter
- 3 of 'Abdmanāt, his mother; and she
- 4 passed away in al-Hijr
- 5 in the year 162 [= 267 AD]
- 6 in the month Tammūz. May damn
- 7 the Lord of Eternity all who desecrate  
this grave
- 8 or open it, except
- 9 his children. He shall be damned, who  
buries und removes from it [a corpse].

Transl.: M. Marx



#### JSTham 1: Thamudic Inscription (vertical)

##### Transcription:

- 'n rqš bnt 'bdmnt

##### Translation:

- [grave of] Raqūš, daughter of 'Abdmanāt

Transl.: M. C. A. Macdonald



Fig. 13 Quran manuscript  
Obj. No. 320  
10<sup>th</sup> century  
Ink on parchment  
19.4 × 25.2 cm  
Sura 4, verses 12–19  
Provenance unknown  
King Faysal Centre for Islamic Research and Studies,  
Riyadh, 2580  
(manuscript given to King Fahd)



Fig. 14 Three Quran leaves in cufic script  
Obj. No. 319 a-c  
9<sup>th</sup> century  
Ink and gold on vellum  
14.5 × 40 cm (double leaf)  
Provenance unknown  
National Museum, Riyadh

top right: Sura 5: 15–16  
– ornament on the left  
middle right: Sura 5: 17–18  
– left (framed): Sura 5: 27  
(without begin of verse)  
down right: Sura 5: 6–7  
– left: Sura 5: 7–8

This is an example of a beautiful, elaborate, balanced, and well-written Kufic script. Symbols, used to differentiate the letters from one another, have been added with small dots of ink over and underneath the letters. Dots in red ink are placed above, underneath, and along the baseline in order to distinguish the vowels *a*, *i*, and *u*. Dots in blue ink are written to represent the double accent mark (Arab.: *šaddah*), an orthographic indication to emphasise the pronunciation of consonants.



Fig. 15 Tombstone of Hasa, daughter of Musa,  
son of Salam  
Obj. No. 301  
9<sup>th</sup> century  
Basalt  
40 × 18 cm  
Provenance unknown  
King Fahd National Library, Riyadh, 314879

#### Transcription:

- 1 bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-
- 2 [r]aḥīm allāhumma ṣa[lli]
- 3 ‘alā Muḥammadin ‘abdi=
- 4 ka wa-rasūlika wa-
- 5 ġfir li-Ḥassata binti Mū=
- 6 sā bni Sallāmin m[ā]
- 7 taqaddama min ḍanbi-hā
- 8 [wa-]mā ta’aḥḥara ‘āmīn
- 9 rabba l-‘ā=
- 9 lamīn

#### Translation:

- 1 In the name of God the Merciful,
- 2 the Compassionate, O God bless
- 3 Muḥammad your servant,
- 4 and your Prophet, and
- 5 forgive Ḥassah, daughter of Mū-
- 6 sā, son of Sallām, for what
- 7 sins she had previously committed
- 8 and what [sins she has committed] of late.
- 9 Amen, Lord
- 9 of all worlds!

Arabic text/transl.: M. Marx & I. Mohr  
cf. Paris Catalogue 2010: 500



Fig. 16 Tombstone of Shaykh Abu Bakr,  
son of Muhammad, son of Ibrahim al-Tabari  
Obj. No. 315  
Signed by ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Ubayy Harami.  
8 dhu’l-hijja 613 AH/18 March 1217 AD  
Basalt  
42 × 37 × 7 cm  
al-Ma’la cemetery, Mecca  
Qasr Khizam Museum, Jidda, 453

#### Transcription:

- 1 [the uppermost minimalised line, top right] lā ‘ilāha ‘illā llāhu wa-l-ḥamdu li-llāhi
- 2 bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi
- 3 wa-man yaḥruḡ min baitihī muḥāğiran ‘ilā llāhi wa-rasūlihī ṭumma yudrikhu
- 4 l-mautu fa-qad waqa‘a ‘ağruḥū ‘alā llāhi wa-kāna llāhu ġafūran raḥīmā;
- 5 hāḍā qabru š-šaiḥi š-šāliḥi l-muwaffaḡi s-sa‘īdi
- 6 Abū (!) Bakri bni Muḥammadi bni ‘Ibrāhīma ṭ-Ṭabariyi tuwuffiya bi-‘Arafata
- 7 bi-l-mauqifi yauma ṭ-ṭāmini min Ḍi l-Ḥiğğati min sanati ṭalāṭata ‘āsara (!) wa-sittimi‘atin
- 8 wa-huwa muḥrimun raḥimahu llāhu raḥmatan wāsi‘atan wa-ğamī‘a l-mus[limīna]
- 9 wa-šallā llāhu ‘alā Muḥammadin wa-‘āliḥi wa-sallama.

[on the lower border external to the circle, the following two lines]

- 10 ‘amalu ‘Abdirraḥmāni bni ‘Ubaiyin Ḥaramī ‘afā llāhu ‘anhu wa-‘an ġamī‘i l-muslimīna
- 11 wa-šallā llāhu ‘alā Muḥammadin wa-‘alā ‘āliḥi wa-sallama.

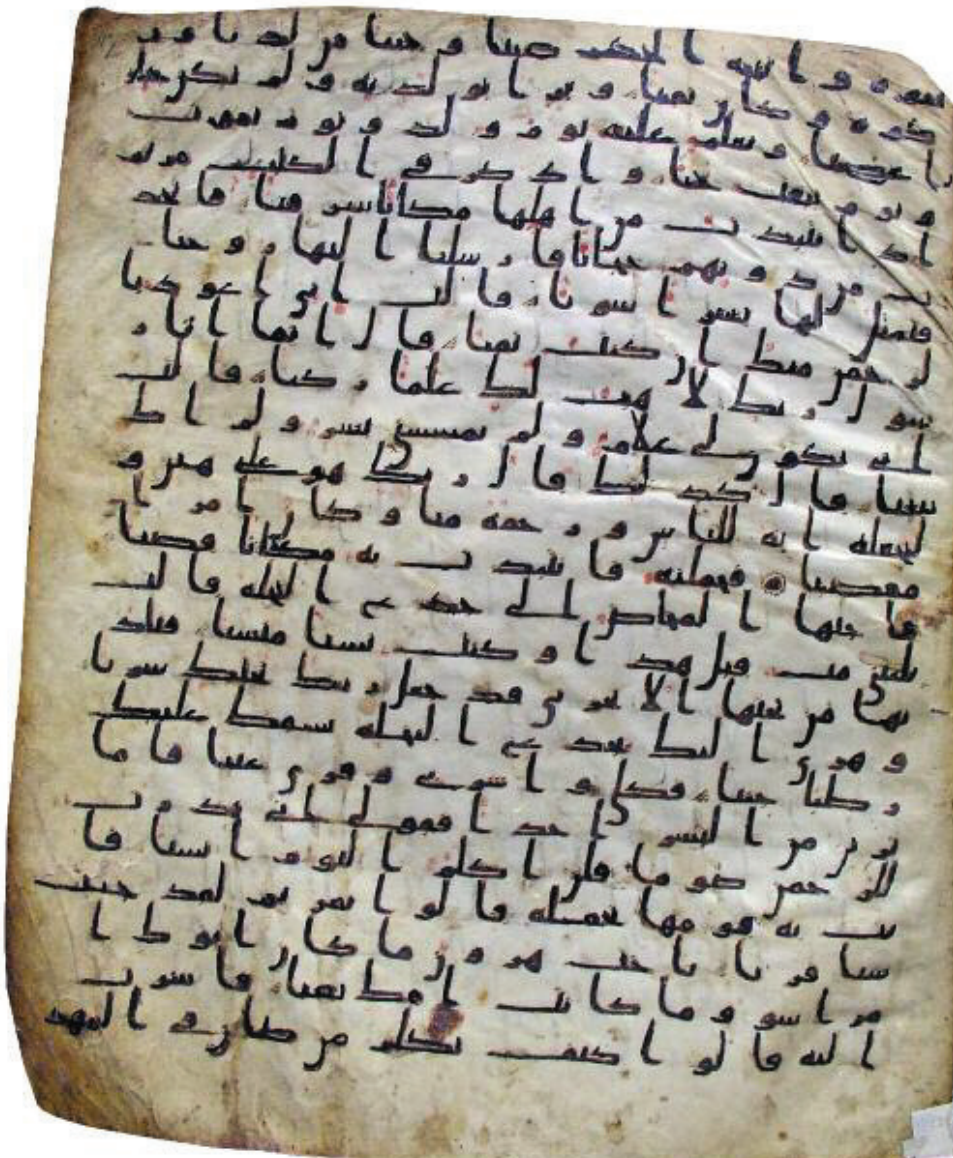
#### Translation:

- 1 There is no god but God! Praise be to God!
- 2 In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate
- 3 Whoso goes forth from his house as an emigrant to God and His Messenger,
- 4 and then death overtakes him, his wage shall have fallen on God; surely God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate.
- 5 This is the grave of the righteous, fortunate, and goodly Sheikh
- 6 Abū Bakr, son of Muḥammad, son of Ibrāhīm, from Ṭabaristān, who passed away in ‘Arafah
- 7 at the Wuqūf-place on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of [the month] Ḍi l-Ḥiğğah in the year 613
- 8 as he was undertaking the Holy Pilgrimage. May God have mercy upon him and upon all Muslims!
- 9 May God bless Muḥammad and his famliy, and grant them peace!

- 10 [This stone] is the work of ‘Abdarraḥmān, son of Ubayy Ḥaramī; may God forgive him and all Muslims,
- 11 May God bless Muḥammad and his family, and grant them peace!

Arabic text/transl.: M. Marx & I. Mohr





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Fig. 1 Ms. Wetzstein II 1913

Sura 19, verses 12–29

early 8th century

Parchment of Damascene  
provenance, oldest almost  
complete codex of the Quran  
Berlin State Library – Prussian  
Cultural Heritage Foundation,  
ms. We II 1913, fol. 117

Michael Marx

## The Quran – the First Arabic Book

### Arabs in Antiquity

The Arab people become historically visible in the sources of the ancient world during the first millennium BC. The earliest document containing the designation 'Arab' is found in an Akkadian inscription on the Kurkh monolith, a stele containing the *res gestae* of the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III (859–824 BC): he is said to have confiscated 1,000 camels from the Arab Gindibu following the Battle of Qarqar. The Hebrew bible also mentions the Arabs and the names of Arab tribes on a number of occasions. Similarly in Greek literature, they are mentioned, e.g. in the tragedy *Prometheus* by Aeschylus (died 456 BC). In his description of the Arabs, the historian Herodotus (died 424 BC) notes that they lived as nomads in the deserts between the Persian Empire, Yemen, and the Mediterranean. Herodotus also writes that the Arabs called the goddess Urania by the name *Alilat* – and Arab sources around one thousand years later, together with the Quran itself – know of an Arab deity of a similar name: *Allat* (cf. Sura 53: 19).

The Arabs were also known in the Persian Empire: in the palace at Persepolis they are shown along with other tributary peoples. Here, the Arab delegation can be recognised by their attire and the accompanying dromedary. Arabic is also named as one of the languages in which the apostles of Jesus Christ spoke at the Pentecost miracle (Acts of the Apostles 2: 1–18). The Romans had been present in Syria and Palestine since the first century and coexisted with the Arabs for several centuries. The Roman emperor Philip the Arab (204–249 AD) can even be recognised as an Arab by his name – he came from a family of Arab tribal leaders in the region of modern-day Syria.

### Arabic Language and Literature

With the exception of a few individual words in ancient sources, only sparse evidence of the Arabic language in the age of Antiquity has been found. Very few texts actually written in Arabic can be inferred from inscription sources found in the north and south of the Arabian Peninsula and dating from the pre-Islamic period. Not until the Arabic accounts of the 8th and 9th centuries, i.e. in the Islamic period, do we find substantial material. The authenticity of these oral Arabic accounts, first put in writing in the 'Abbasid epoch (predominantly poetry, but including some prose), is disputed in many cases. Nevertheless, significant sections of the material are regarded as reliable.

As paradox as it may sound, Arab-Islamic literature, in spite of its focus on the texts of the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet (*hadith*), was particularly absorbed with the pre-Islamic literature of the so-called 'Period of Ignorance' (*jahiliyya*). For the Arab philologists, texts from the pre-Islamic period always were considered first and foremost as lexicographic and grammatical reference texts. Over and above these scientific uses, pre-Islamic texts also represented the nostalgic point of reference for Arab identity. In pre-Islamic times it was literature that was held in extremely high regard by Arab tribes; it was the Arab art form *par excellence*. The poet could assume a political function as the tribe's speaker and compete with other tribes' poets at fairs. Old Arabic, pre-Islamic poetry, almost 100,000 verses of which are known from the collections of the 'Abbasid epoch, offers a unique source of information on the life and culture of the pre-Islamic Arabs. The poems are attributed to an individual poet who, according to Old Arabian concepts, acquired his inspiration through his contact with spirits (genie, Arab. *jinn*). Poems of a poet (Arab. *sha'ir*) are recited by reciters (Arab. *rawi*) and so passed on, in the pre-Islamic period, exclusively orally.

The language used in long odes (sg. *qasida*) and fragments already differs substantially from Arabic dialects in the pre-Islamic period. Arabs were obviously already using a universal Arabic language in addition to the tribal dialects. This commonly-shared language is very similar to the language of the Quran, explaining why pre-Islamic literature served as reference material for Arabic lexicography. This fact, that the language of literature and the Quran are very similar, resulted in the Prophet being disparaged as a poet. Sura 21: 5 refutes that the Prophet is a poet (Arab. *sha'ir*) whose inspiration comes from spirits (Arab. *jinn*). Sura 52: 29 goes on to contradict the assertion that the Prophet is a soothsayer and one possessed (Arab. *kahin*). Both of these repudiations make it clear how strongly Arabian cultural traditions formed the Prophet's environment.

In textual accounts of pre-Islamic literature and the Quran, the emphasis is on their oral nature, despite all delineation and differences. Pre-Islamic literature, passed down through the poets from reciter to reciter, was not systematically recorded until the 'Abbasid epoch. The text of the Quran was laid down in writing much more quickly; however, to this day, manuscripts and other written media do not represent the preferred transmission route. This switching between transmission routes allows the original Arabian context to be discerned right through till today.

### Muhammad's Proclamations and the Text of the Quran

To what extent the population of the western Arabian towns of Mecca and Medina knew and used writing and writing materials cannot be reliably stated. It can be said with certainty that the merchants of Mecca kept trading records, however. Terms such as *qirtas* (papyrus), *suhuf* (scrolls), *midad* (ink), or *qalam* (reed pen) are mentioned in the Quran as writing materials and in Sura 2 it is noted that agreements should be fixed in writing. According to Islamic sources there was a Jewish community in Medina, which probably also used writing and writing materials for religious purposes. At an encounter between the Prophet and the Jews of Medina, as accounted in the Prophet's biography, there is a disagreement

about the existence of the stoning verse in the Hebrew bible. During the encounter, it is said, the Jewish participant concealed the verse in question from view in the Torah scroll.

One Hadith (an act or saying of Prophet Muhammad) states that a codex (Arab. *mus'haf*) was bought from a Christian. It is said that there were scribes among the Prophet's companions who wrote down the texts of his proclamations on parchment and other materials. The best known of these was Zaid b. Thabit, who was required to learn the 'writing of the Jews' following a Hadith. According to the Prophet's biography, the Treaty of Hudaibiya, which the Prophet concluded with the enemies of Mecca, was recorded in writing along with the 'Constitution of Medina', a written constitutional document after the Hijra (622 AD) that formed the basis for relations between the Jewish tribes of Yathrib (later Medina) and the Muslim community. As the leader of the first Islamic state, Muhammad himself is said to have sent letters to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, the Egyptian Viceroy, the Emperor of Persia, the kings of Oman and Yamama (in central Arabia), and the Ethiopian Negus, and invited them to recognise him as God's prophet; historically, however, the latter is not probable, at least not in all cases. Muhammad's proclamations also display a very early link to the book medium. Even in the early Meccan Suras (Sura 96: 1–5) the Quran is imbued with great authority by being presented as a recital of a heavenly book. The Prophet recites a text kept in writing by God, but proclaimed by his voice. The earliest Meccan Suras include a wide range of topics, of which the proclamation of the Last Judgment, when the actions of all will be judged, occupies a core position. God's Creation is described in a language reminiscent of the psalms; it will be followed by a 'second creation', when the Last Judgment will befall the people of the earth. Man is accountable, records of his deeds are held by God, and he must answer to his Creator and Judge at the end of time.

For example, in Sura 81 reference is made to heavenly scriptures, in which the deeds of men are recorded. The Prophet himself is seen in the same tradition as the biblical proclaimers, who warned about Judgment Day and called for faith in the one true God. According to the Quran, individuals known from the biblical scriptures, for example Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus, but also messengers from Arabian contexts (not mentioned in the Bible), such as Hud, Shu'ayb and Salih, were sent out to warn their respective peoples and tribes about God's Judgment. These Old Arabian punishment legends refer to vanished towns and tribes of Arabia, where the warnings of God's messengers were not taken seriously. The concept of an Arab environment in which other deities were worshipped in addition to God plays a central role in the Quran. The Quran (in the Medinan Suras) employs the term *jahiliya*: 'the Period of Ignorance' (Sura 3: 154; Sura 5: 55; Sura 33: 33; Sura 48: 26) for Arabia's pre-Islamic epoch, a single, terse expression to describe and bundle the false and objectionable traditions of the pre-Quranic epoch into one.

The reference to biblical history attains prominence with the mid-Meccan Suras. It is said that Abraham built the Kaaba, the sacred Meccan site (Sura 22: 26–29; Sura 2: 127–129) and proclaimed the belief in one God in Arabia. Noah, too, warned his people, similar to the Arab messengers, that God had sent the flood as a punishment. The mention of Moses and Christ, also recorded as Muhammad's forerunners, is tied to the reports in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testa-



ment, where long passages of the Quran retell parts of the story of Moses (Sura 20), or that of Mary, mother of Jesus Christ (Sura 19). At the same time the Quran is critical of the accounts of the Christians and the Jews. The Christian concept of Jesus being the Son of God is strongly rebutted. According to the Quran, Jesus was merely a messenger of God (as was Muhammad); he was a man whose followers had built an incorrect theology around his words.

The language used and topics dealt with in the Quran reveal that Muhammad's environment was very familiar with Jewish and Christian traditions. Neither a Christian nor a Jewish presence in either Mecca or Yathrib can be identified on the evidence of archaeological findings alone. Interestingly, however, Islamic historical writings contain a wide range of information on the Jewish tribes in Medina; the historian al-Azraqi (died 837) writes about Christian motifs and an image of Mary in the interior of the Kaaba. The 114 Suras of the Quran, proclaimed over a period of more than twenty years, therefore reflect the birth of the Islamic community through its confrontation with the leading religious traditions of the day. The extensive discussion of biblical stories, legal traditions, and eschatology demonstrates to us how heavily the Quran's argumentation draws on the corpus of neighboring traditions, which were obviously present in Arabia.

Even Old Arabian history is incorporated, in particular in the Meccan Suras. The Ethiopian governor Abraha's campaign is alluded to in Sura 105, in which God demonstrates how merciful he was to the Meccans by foiling the attempted conquest. The Arabian tribe of the Quraysh, who lived in Mecca, and their caravan trade with the North and South of Arabia is mentioned in Sura 106. Here the tribe is depicted as being blessed with divine favor. In the opinion of many exegetes, the martyrdom of the Christians in South Arabian Najran (early 6<sup>th</sup> century) is echoed in Sura 85. The Quran warns the persecutors of the Arabian Christians in Najran of divine punishment.

In the initial verses of Sura 30, the conflict between the Byzantines and the Persian Sassanians is examined. This is obviously a brief reference to the international conflict shaking the world during Muhammad's lifetime. A number of Old Arabian place and tribal names can be found in the Quran, such as al-Hijr in Sura 15: 80 (Arab. *as'hab al-Hijr*, 'People of al-Hijr'), which is mentioned with its Greek name *Egra* (Hegra) as the southern trading centre of the Nabataeans by Strabon and Plinius (today's Mada'in Salih). The Arabian Thamud tribe, often mentioned in the Quran (e.g. in Sura 7: 73) as belonging to the damned peoples, are reported in the Quran as paying no heed to God's apostle Salih; using their Greek name *Thamuditai*, they are described in inscriptions and in Claudius Ptolemy's (died 180) *Geographia* as populating the North Arabian region.

The Quran, presented to us today as a book, had itself not yet assumed the form of a codex at the time of the proclamations. However, the text already possessed a special liturgical function in the first Islamic community. Quranic texts were used in prayer and services. According to Islamic tradition the Quran was recited in a particular manner. In the view of this Islamic tradition the particular linguistic aesthetics of the text represent a special characteristic of the Quran, continuing forms of Jewish and Christian traditions in which the recitation of the holy texts represents known liturgical practices, but the linguistic aesthetics of the text itself play no role. The aesthetic dimension of the Quran's oral recitation is also reflected in the Islamic understanding of the textual accounts themselves.

The Quran is seen as originally representing an oral text and was initially intended to be passed in this way. In Islamic tradition the oral recitative character is therefore regarded as the ideal form, which in no way detracts from the fact that Islamic tradition emphasises that the text was fixed in writing by the Prophet's companions at an early stage.

### The History of the Quranic Text

The mosaic frieze inscription in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built in 691–92 AD by the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (ruled 685–705 AD) is regarded as the first, precisely dated Quranic text. The mosaic strip, written in Kufic script and located between the dome and the octagon, comprises a combination of verses taken from different Suras in the Quran that emphasise the theological dispute with the person of Christ. Handwritten parchment manuscripts can be assumed to be only a few years younger than this, but can never be precisely dated. Some of the oldest textual findings include the manuscripts discovered in Sana'a in 1970. Adopting palaeographic principles, the oldest parchments among them are assigned to the period dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century based on the style of script. The script style used in this and similar manuscripts is today known as the Hijazi script style.

In addition to the Yemeni manuscripts, other manuscript fragments, whose origins are most likely from Cairo and Damascus, are known to exist. These are held today in collections in the Middle East and in Europe. One of the oldest manuscripts known is a parchment palimpsest manuscript from Sana'a, around thirty pages of which remain (Fig. 3). Below the uppermost layer visible today, written in a style associated with the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to identify a second, washed out script, also containing Quranic texts (Fig. 2). In this archaic-looking script lies one of the earliest pieces of evidence of Arabic writing on parchment. An analysis of the underlying layer reveals an earlier stage of Arabic orthography, in addition to variant readings (Arab. *qira'at*), as reported in the traditional Islamic corpus regarding the transmission and reception of the Quran.

According to Islamic sources, competing text versions were propagated from the early period of written Islamic texts. They are partly the result of varying oral traditions, and partly due to the ambiguous character of some letters and the absence of vowel marks in early manuscripts. For example, the earliest manuscripts written in Hijazi script from the Umayyad epoch (Fig. 4) use only very few diacritics and no marks for short vowels. Manuscript Wetzstein 1913 in the Berlin National Library (Fig. 1) is possibly the oldest most complete manuscript (85%), written in a very late Hijazi script. The Wetzstein manuscript shows already similarities with the Kufic script, where vocalisation is very often indicated by red dots (for the three short vowels *a*, *i* and *u*). The ambiguity of Quranic manuscripts in the first few centuries must be seen in the context of the still incomplete commitment to a given reading system. Even at the time of the Prophet, Islamic sources report that his companions occasionally presented differing wordings for the same text.

The distribution of the various readings in the schools at Medina, Damascus, Homs, Kufa and Basra, and beyond, was probably accelerated due to the rapid ge-

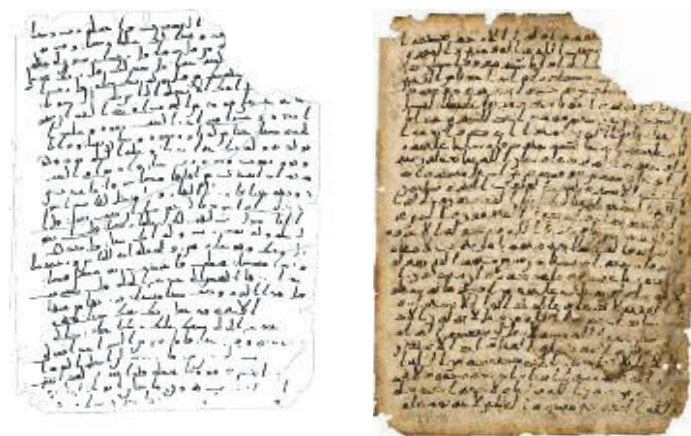


Fig. 2 Sana'a palimpsest  
lower layer  
Sura 19, verses 6–29  
graphical reproduction:  
Hadiya Gurtmann

Fig. 3 Sana'a palimpsest  
Sura 33, verses 6–18  
upper layer: first half of 8<sup>th</sup> century,  
lower layer: c. 650 AD  
photography funded by the ANR-  
Project "De l'Antiquité tardive à  
l'Islam" (DATI), Dar al-Makhtutat  
01-27.1, fol. 23B

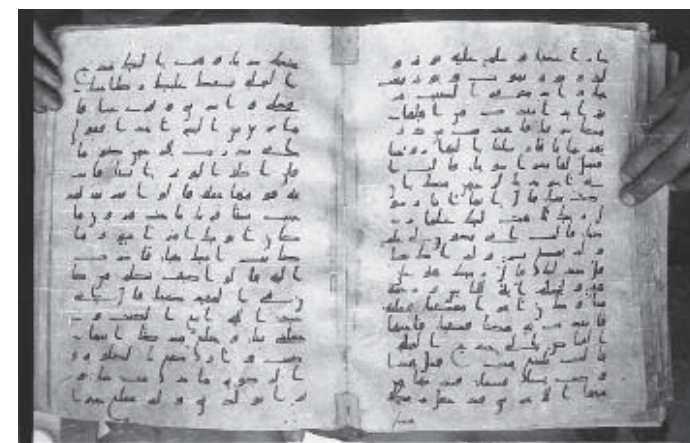
ographic expansion of the Arabian Empire. The Umayyads were already aware of these processes when Caliph 'Abd al-Malik had the orthography of the Quran officially inspected by his governor al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf (661–714 AD). It was not until the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Baghdad that the scholar Ibn Mujahid (died 936) managed to impose a system of seven text readings to be employed for public use of the text in prayers and recitals without, however, excluding all other readings.

This variability can still be seen in the Islamic world today, when in the Hafs reading (Middle East, Arabia, Turkey, Iran, India, central and east Asia) in Sura 19: 19 the angel says to Mary: *li-ahaba laki ghulaman* ("That I may give you a son [Jesus]") (Fig. 7), while in the Warsh reading (North and West Africa) he says: *li-yahaba laki ghulaman* ("That He [God] may give you a son [Jesus]") (Fig. 8). The study of these different readings has formed part of the curriculum of the Islamic sciences since the very beginning. In terms of the classical Quranic sciences, this juxtaposition of the various readings results from the diversity of oral traditions, but also inconsistent grammatical analyses. However, one of the fundamental principles of the accepted readings is that they agree with the orthography of the text defined both in the Umayyad epoch and later in Andalusia.

The early, vertical-format parchment manuscripts known from the Umayyad epoch, in which the script appears less calligraphic and the primary aim of the scribe appears to have been to record the text, are replaced from the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century on by a new, more monumental handwriting style. This new type, such as seen in the Cairo manuscript (Fig. 5), or in the manuscript now held in Samarkand, write the text in horizontal format in a highly regular, angular, monumental script, known as Kufic script. The focus here is on the calligraphic composition of the sheet as a whole. Today, the Kufic style is predominantly employed as a decorative script, and there are artistic representations of Quranic verses using modern Kufic alternatives.

Very different calligraphic traditions have developed over the centuries across the entire Islamic world. In the Middle East the Ottoman Empire scripts, in particu-

Fig. 4 Ms. Medina 1a  
Sura 19, verses 14–32  
from the photo archive of Gotthelf  
Bergsträßer, original material:  
parchment, kept at the Topkapı  
Sarayı Museum, presumably  
Medinese provenance



lar, characterised Quranic calligraphy, especially the fine and sweeping style known as *naskhi*, which forms the basis for modern Arabic printing fonts (see the article by B. Kellner-Heinkele, Fig. 22). The calligraphic tradition has remained vibrant to this day, and all printed Qurans distributed in the modern world follow the calligraphic tradition of the Arabic script.

### The Quran as a Printed Text

Although the Middle East knew printing at the time of Ibrahim Müteferrika (1670/74–1745), who introduced printing to the Muslims in the Ottoman Empire and started the first printing press using Arabic script in Istanbul in 1729, it would be another century before the Quran text was printed. Prior to this period, printing presses had only been utilised in Christian and Jewish communities within the Ottoman Empire. Outside of the Islamic world, the first Quran text was printed in Venice in 1537/38, to be sold inside the Ottoman Empire. The enterprise failed when the Ottoman authorities noticed the multitude of errors, especially in the vowels. In the Russian Empire, the Russian Tsarina Catherine II funded a printed edition of the Quran in St. Petersburg in 1787. This print was reprinted several times in Kasan (in 1801 or 1803), capital of a province predominantly populated by Tatar Muslims, and remained in place as the Quran reference text in both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The printed Kasan edition is probably the first printed edition of a complete Quran text to be used by Muslims.

In Western Europe, the Hamburg theologian Abraham Hinckelmann (1652–1695) printed the Quran in Arabic with the title *Al-Coranus sive Lex Islamitica Muham-medis, Filii Abdallae, Pseudoprophetae*. It formed the basis for the edition printed by the Saxon Arabist Gustav Flügel (1802–1870) in Leipzig. His edition, printed in



Fig. 5 Ms. Cairo  
Sura 22, verses 71–73  
from the photo archive of  
Gotthelf Bergsträßer,  
original material: parchment

1834 in Leipzig with the title *Corani textus arabicus*, was seen as the reference text for western Orientalists into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A few years later, Flügel followed the Quran itself with the first printed text concordance of the Quran (*Concordantiae Corani Arabicae*, Leipzig 1842) using a verse numbering that often deviated from Islamic verse numbering systems. The widespread Kufic verse numbering did not become established in western Oriental studies until the 1930s, when the official Egyptian printed edition of 1924 became known.

Although printing using Arabic script was already known in the Ottoman Empire in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in Persia and in India, the first Islamic prints of the Quranic text do not appear until relatively late. It was probably the development of lithographic printing that allowed large numbers of calligraphically attractive texts to be printed. These first lithographic prints were made in Persia (Tabriz, 1833) and India, and somewhat later in Istanbul (1877). It may well have been this new lithographic technique that increased acceptance, because it was not a typesetter who set the text from types, but a scribe who created a calligraphic template, which was then printed onto paper. So when a lithographic Quran was finally produced, it was still a scribe who wrote down the text. Or it may simply have been a change in demand in the modern age that led to the lithographic prints in the Islamic world.

Although it is often reported that the 1924 Cairo edition, commissioned in 1919 by Egyptian King Fu'ad and prepared by a commission of scholars from al-Azhar university, was the first Islamic typeset, this is not correct. The Quranic text was first produced as a typeset prior to World War I in Cairo (Bulaq 1882). The 1924 Cairo edition was not typeset because an offset print method was used (linotype). The

edition known as the 'Cairo print' was printed in 1924 in the national survey office in Giza and represented a new standard in the history of Quran printing (Fig. 6). Thanks to the publications of the German Arabist Gotthelf Bergsträßer (1886–1933), who taught at the Egyptian University (now Cairo University) around 1930, the official Egyptian Quran was introduced into Europe and replaced the Flügel print edition as the standard reference. The Egyptian edition was characterised by precise vocalisation and verse numbering. The recitation rules, for example, on how certain phonemes are joined, are also indicated by additional signs. Also, special pause marks indicate at what point in the text it is forbidden, advised against, allowed, recommended or commanded to pause during text recitals. These characters were not all simply invented specially for the Cairo print edition; the Egyptian commission made use of previously existing, Ottoman Empire text characters and adapted them systematically for use with the Hafs 'an 'Asim reading common in the Ottoman Empire.

The Egyptian print edition has been reprinted on numerous occasions since 1924, both inside and outside of Egypt. Smaller orthographic characters have changed or have been unified in the newer editions. The orthography of the print was determined according to tracts on orthography of the Quranic text by scholars of the Classical period, such as al-Dani (died 1052) and Ibn Najjah (died 1109). This step meant that the Cairo Quran's orthography recognised the authority of the Classical period, a standard different from developments in the Ottoman Empire, India, and Persia. Specifically, developments in these regions had, through the centuries, occasionally adapted the orthography of the Quranic text to the classical, Arabic-language standard.

The official Saudi Quran has been printed by the *King Fahd Complex For The Printing Of The Holy Quran* in Medina since the 1980s (Arab. *Mujamma' al-Malik Fahd li-tibā'at al-mus'haf ash-sharīf*), opened in 1984 by the Saudi monarch. Not only is the Arabic text printed here, but the same institution has undertaken translations into more than thirty languages. The orthography of the printed edition follows that of the Cairo edition, which was rewritten by the Syrian calligrapher 'Uthman Taha (Fig. 7). A large number of the pause rules were redefined to suit the recitation rules dominating in Saudi Arabia. It is interesting to note that in Medina different calligraphic traditions in the Islamic world are also taken into consideration. For example, editions printed for Muslims of the Indian subcontinent are using an Indo-Pakistani script style of Arabic.

In addition to the dominant (1) Hafs 'an 'Asim reading, the seven remaining and commonly used readings have also been printed in Medina for a number of years. They are: (2) the al-Duri reading after Abu 'Amr (Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, etc.); (3) the Warsh 'an Nafi' reading (Algeria, Morocco [Fig. 8], Mauretania, Niger, Mali, West Africa, Nigeria, etc.) and (4) the Qalun 'an Nafi' reading (Libya, Tunisia, parts of Yemen). Even though almost all Islamic countries have printed their own Qurans since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Medinan edition, which is distributed free across the globe in its various editions, may be regarded as the most successful, modern printed edition.



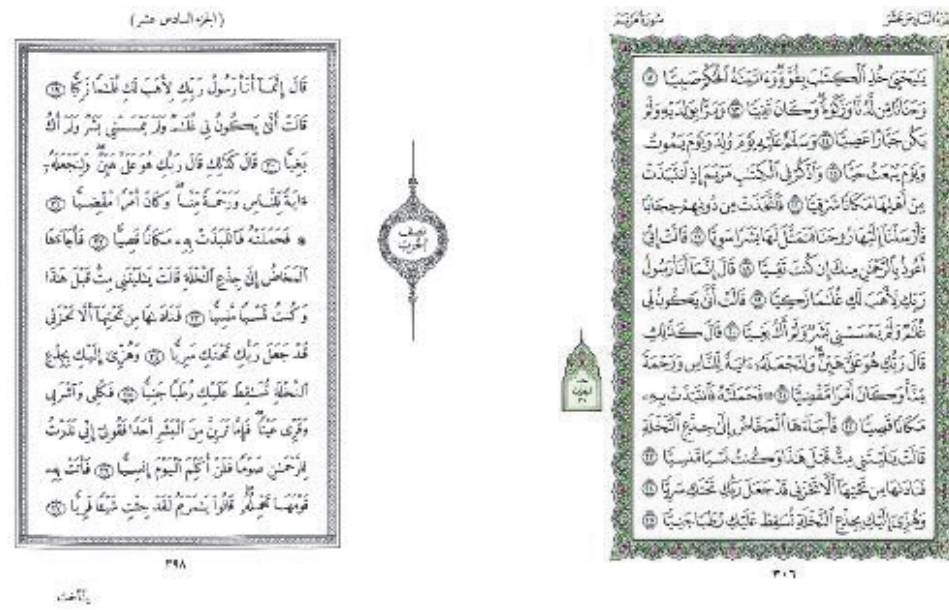


Fig. 6 Edition Cairo 1924

Sura 19, verses 19–27  
print of the Quran in the reading of  
Hafs  
Cairene print of the Quran,  
Bûlâq: al-Matba'at al-Amîriyya 1924,  
p. 398

Fig. 7 Medina Edition  
Sura 19, verses 12–25  
print of the Quran in the reading  
of Hafs, written by the Syrian  
calligrapher 'Uthman Taha  
Mujamma' al-Malik Fahd li-t-  
tibâ'at al-mus'haf ash-sharîf,  
Medina, 2003/4, p. 306

Fig. 8 Moroccan Edition  
Sura 19, verses 8–22  
Moroccan print of the Quran in the  
reading of Warsh, 1975, p. 244

## Quran: Voice and Script

With the exception of a handful of 6<sup>th</sup> century stone inscriptions, the Arabic script and language traces its first literary testimonial in the text of the Quran. Although the text was not recorded in writing in its final form while the Prophet was still alive, the history of the text can be retraced in parchment and inscriptions to within just a few decades of Muhammad's death (632 AD). The Prophet's scribes had already recorded the text in writing, but it was not until the text was collected by Caliph 'Uthman b. 'Affan (died 656 AD) and initially standardised by Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (646–705 AD) that the originally highly variable text forms were increasingly unified. It should be noted, however, that the written text accounts were of considerably less significance than the oral tradition. Although the written text of the Quran was unified at a very early stage, ambiguous letters continued to leave room for divergent interpretations. In the rapidly expanding Islamic world, a number of different recitation systems had developed since the 7<sup>th</sup> century. As already mentioned, it was not until the 10<sup>th</sup> century that Ibn Mujahid (died 936 AD) managed to formulate a system of seven alternative readings to be employed for public use.

The realm of Islamic spirituality encompasses the artful recitation (the oral form) of the text (Arab. *tajwid*). Calligraphy and script ornamentation have characterised this sacred space from the very outset. In addition to certain prayer formulas, Islamic prayer, either collectively or individually, always requires the recitation of a section of text from the Quran. Reading from a book is not envisaged here, and concerning ritual prayer, Muslims would frown upon the practice. Compared to Jewish or Christian liturgies, where the Torah scrolls or the gospel are recited, Islamic worship can be maintained without the physical presence of the book. This may seem surprising at first, considering that Muslims associate themselves with Jews and Christians in the tradition known as the People of the Book (Arab. *ahl al-kitab*). How can this conspicuous absence of the book in Islamic prayer and worship be explained?

The Quranic text, known in its book form as *mus'haf*, can be traced back to Muhammad's oral proclamations, made between 610 and 632 AD and based on the oral transfer of a text, not on a book. The Quran's first historical medium, if viewed from a communications science perspective, is, therefore, not the writing, but the *voice* of the Prophet. The text, proclaimed in Arabic, was not only first *delivered* and *heard* by the first community of believers, but it was also *recited*. The Islamic textual register, including the readings still widespread today, can be traced back along a chain of 30–40 generations and a period of 1,400 years. This historical background leads directly up to the first recitation by the Prophet himself. For Muslims, the recitation of the Quranic text symbolises the recollection and the visualisation of an oral proclamation. It is not the recorded, written text that is at the focal point of Islamic spirituality, but the audible, acoustically tangible text, passed down through generations together with its sound form.

### From Stone Inscriptions to facebook: The Success Story of a Late Classical Language

Although the oral textual form enjoys priority in Islamic tradition, the very early calligraphic tradition of the Arabic script is also worthy of note. The oldest preserved handwritten fragments were composed in a professional, but still ‘uncalligraphic’ style. Recording the written information appears to be the primary aim in these earliest textual testimonies, in which the Hijazi script was most prominently used. With time, as observed in the Kufic mosaics of the Dome of the Rock and in Kufic manuscripts of the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the uniform, carefully drawn, precise writing style and text arrangement dominates the Islamic textual tradition. The early, vertical, Hijazi manuscripts appear to be primarily concerned with precisely noting and recording the individual letters. The horizontal, Kufic style manuscripts, noted from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, already demonstrate a pleasing aesthetic design. The Arabic script is used in the most artistic form possible when recording the Quranic text. Arabic texts in the monumental Kufic style on parchment, such as the one used in the Cairo manuscript, are almost exclusively reserved for texts from the Quran, i.e. there are practically no other books written using this style.

Islamic sources report in detail on the special recitation of the Quranic text by the Prophet himself, as well as by the Prophet’s companions. The recitation of the Quran was obviously associated from a very early time with special rules of intonation and pronunciation. It is almost as if the written accounts of the text have developed into a kind of ‘calligraphic recitation’. Because the design of Islamic sacral spaces always avoided representations of living beings, ornamental motifs and calligraphy evolved in their place. As paradoxical as it may sound: the aesthetics of sacral Islamic architecture and religious texts developed out of the prohibition of images in the sacral area.

The ‘*Roads of Arabia*’ exhibition presents the foundations of the Islamic religion, which can be traced back to the events in Mecca and Medina between 610 and 632 AD, in a new light. In the cultural landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia, alphabetic scripts were in use as early as the first millennium BC. For example, there is evidence of a South Semitic alphabetic tradition (in the Ancient-South-Arabian and Ancient-North-Arabian inscriptions) and of the North-West Semitic alphabets. The Nabataean alphabet may be regarded as a development of the Aramaic (North-West Semitic) alphabet and continued to be used extensively in the centuries following the downfall of the independent Nabataean kingdom in 106 AD. The Old Arabic script developed from the Late Nabataean script – with its ligatures connecting the Aramaic letters – as demonstrated by 6<sup>th</sup> century inscriptions. With the recording of the text of the Quran in written Arabic script, these Old Arabic texts mark the beginning of a new epoch, registering the Islamic religion’s reference text as the definitive symbol of the political and religious landscape in the Islamic Orient.

The written and oral language of the first Arabian Empire spread across a wide geographic area as a consequence of the expansion of the first Islamic state. This development turned the Arabic language, despite only sparse evidence of its existence in the Classical world, to both a global language and the language of science, written and spoken by Arabs and non-Arabs alike, from the Islamic epoch

Fig. 9 Ms. Codex Meknes  
Sura 19, verses 4–26  
fol. 199v/200r  
from the photo archive of  
Gotthelf Bergsträßer



onwards. The language of pre-Islamic literature, manifested in the text of the Quran which thereby represents Arabic’s first recorded linguistic testimonial in writing, has retained its grammar system and vocabulary.

Arabic, currently the official language in more than twenty countries and still doing service as the language of scholars all over the Islamic world, therefore looks back on a success story without compare. From the Arabic stone inscriptions, through the parchment manuscripts, and also the Arabic papyri, to the paper manuscripts and modern prints, and up to the newest cyber space media, Classical Arabic is the only Middle Eastern/Late Antique language that has remained true to its grammar and basic vocabulary. Knowledge of this language allows an understanding of pre-Islamic poetry and the few known Old Arabic, pre-Islamic inscriptions, as well as the Quran and Classical Arabic literature. The fact that the Arabic language can look back on such a stable linguistic history reflects a development that would barely have been possible without the Quranic text and the emergence of Islam in Arabia.



List of abbreviations

CIS II  
1889– Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars II. Inscriptiones Aramaicas Continens, Académie des Inscriptions & Belles-Lettres. Paris.

EI<sup>2</sup>  
1954–2006 Encyclopaedia of Islam. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 12 vols., ed. by P. Bearman et al. Leiden.

Paris Catalogue 2010  
Al-Ghabban, A. I., André-Salvini, B., Demange, F., Juvin, C. & Cotty, M. (eds.)  
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