

LANGUAGES OF PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

BY

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GEOGRAPHICALLY, the Arabian Peninsula should be regarded as being bounded on the north by the so-called Fertile Crescent, and thus including the desert areas between the Euphrates and the rift valley which stretches north from ʿAqaba. For knowledge of the linguistic situation before Islam in the peninsula so defined, we must depend principally on a vast number of inscriptions — both formal monumental ones and graffiti — very widely scattered from the extreme north to the south in the western half, with a very much smaller number on the east coast. Some useful information may be gained from the Muslim philologists, but such data are chronologically limited to a period of approximately a century before Islam; about the earlier linguistic facts the philologists knew nothing. Moreover, the area roughly coinciding with the modern Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates south of Bahrayn is virtually a blank for the purposes of this study. There are a few inscriptions at Khor Rori (a little east of Sallala), but these belong to a Hadramite settlement there and tell us nothing of the indigenous language; and a few rock inscriptions have been reported (but not yet published) from the Jabal Akhdar. This corner of the peninsula, cut off from the rest of it by the sands of the 'Empty Quarter', remains outside the practical scope of my remarks.

In pre-Islamic times nearly the whole of the area under survey was dominated by the use of a script of South Semitic type¹, with an alphabet comprising 27 or more letters. Only in the extreme north do we find scripts of a North-west Semitic type, comprising a maximum of 22 letters, in use. Nevertheless, it is from a script of the latter type that classical Arabic script as we know it has evolved.

In view of the brief and frequently enigmatic nature of the graffiti, they are (in spite of being present in enormous numbers) of very scanty help towards delineating the linguistic map of the peninsula. Among the more

¹ The sole present-day survivor of this is the Ethiopic script.

formal inscriptions, where they exist, the most significant in many respects are those drafted in Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic and Hadramitic. These four languages (showing many close affinities with each other) were virtually confined to the areas west, south and east of the Sayhad sand desert², plus the Hadramite settlement mentioned above and a similar Minaic-speaking settlement at Dedan/al-ʿUlā in the northern Hijaz. Texts in these 'Sayhadic' languages outside the homelands are in part attributable to transients, as is the case with the Sabaic rock inscriptions at al-Himāʿ, Kawkab and in southern Najd, written by members of Sabaean military expeditions passing through.

In part, however, such texts may be the result of the prestige — of Sabaic in particular — of the language of a high culture with many centuries of tradition behind it, thus leading to its use as a medium for written records by populations for whom it was not a mother-tongue. In the same way, the Palmyrenes and Nabataeans used Aramaic, the great culture-language of the lands bordering the peninsula on the north, for their written records, although it is highly probable that this was not their language of everyday intercourse.

The Himyarite area lay to the south of the Sabaena area and remained, until the fourth century A.D., to a large extent outside the domain of Sabaic literate culture; it is only in the fourth to sixth centuries A.D. that we have any appreciable number of inscriptions from the Himyarite area, and while they are in Sabaic, it seems probable that this was not the Himyarites' native language. It will be remembered that the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (of the late first or possibly early second century A.D.) speaks of Sabaeans and Himyarites (Homerites) as two *ethnē* — a word which for the Greeks had strong implications of independent linguistic communities (it is not in any way a political term).

It is further significant that Hamdani, though able to read South Arabian script and hence to identify proper names, cites allegedly ancient inscriptions which are so unlike, in their style and content, any authentic ancient texts, that we must conclude that all knowledge of genuine Sabaic had vanished by his time; yet he certainly knew something that his contemporaries called Himyaritic (on which see below).

Even in the heart of Sabaean culture in Marib, there are some signs that by the fifth century Sabaic was becoming a 'learned' language, like Latin in the European Middle Ages, rather than a mother-tongue, since

² Thus named by the mediaeval Arab geographers; currently Ramlat al-Sabʿatayn.

some texts of this period show a few features unknown to earlier, 'classical', Sabaic. Such features may, no doubt, in part represent autonomous linguistic evolution, but this does not seem to be a complete explanation, since one fifth century text consistently uses a form of 'relative' pronoun unattested elsewhere, either before or after, except in a text from Dhelama, on the edge of the great south-facing escarpment, well outside the traditional Sabaean domain and in the Himyarite area [Beeston 1976].

It should be stressed that the Sayhadic languages constitute an independent language-family within the Semitic field, and are in no way classifiable as 'dialects' of Arabic. It is true that the Arabic lexicon contains distinct traces of continuity with that of the Sayhadic languages; but when Arabic did displace the earlier languages of the southwest, it is only to be expected that the Yemenite dialects of Arabic should contain much lexical material which is ultimately Sayhadic; and the vast collection of materials in the great mediaeval Arabic lexica includes a good deal that is dialectal, some of it certainly Yemenite [Garbini 1978, 108; Avanzini 1980, 427-8]. Sayhadic syntax also shows many remarkable similarities to that of Arabic. But both here and in the case of the lexicon, it has to be remembered that, before Islam, central Arabia was poised between two magnets of higher and therefore prestigious culture (the Fertile Crescent on the north and Yemen on the south), exposed to influences from both³.

But the crucial factor attesting the independence of the Sayhadic language-family lies in its morphology⁴, which contains a number of distinctive features wholly alien to Arabic; above all, they share the uniform characteristic of a definite article in the form of an affixed *-n*, unattested elsewhere throughout Semitic⁵.

Even in the early centuries A.D. there were other languages than the Sayhadic group in use in Yemen, of which however we possess only

³ This is specially significant in various non-linguistic domains, where some European scholars have been too prone to look only for northern influences, disregarding those from the south.

⁴ It is, after all, morphology which stamps English as a Germanic language, in spite of the enormous influence of Latin and Romance on the lexicon and even, to some extent, the syntax.

⁵ ULLENDORFF [1955, 8 and note 30] rightly says that 'the *-n* affix exists as a deictic element in many Semitic languages'. But no other Semitic language has transformed this rather randomly occurring element into a consistent morpheme with the function of a definite article.

very exiguous evidence. One inscription from Marib⁶ is a votive text beginning with a formulaic preamble in 'classical' Sabaic, but then switches abruptly to an unknown language: though this contains a fair number of lexical items congruous with Sabaic, it shows an incidence of words ending in *-k* which would be wholly unnatural in Sabaic, and it cannot in any way be interpreted as Sabaic. A preponderance of words ending in *-k* is found also in an as yet indecipherable text from the southern escarpment⁷. A third is a still unpublished rock inscription again showing a high proportion of *-k* endings — and which, most interestingly, looks as if it is in verse.

Leaving aside Aramaic, Sayhadic, and the abovementioned unknown South Arabian language (or languages), the inscriptions of the peninsula are classifiable into two groups according to the form of definite article used: on the one hand prefixed *h-/hn-*, and on the other prefixed (')*l-*, the forerunner of Arabic *al-*. Chronologically, the second group might well be regarded as late and innovatory, since its epigraphic attestation dates only from about the 2nd/3rd century A.D., whereas the first group is evidenced from the middle of the first millenium B.C. onwards; yet the *al-* group may in fact be much more ancient, if we accept that, as is usually believed, Herodotus' Arabian deity *Alilat* is *al-Ilā'* «the goddess»⁸.

The *h(n)* dialects include the linguistic forms which are conventionally classified as Dedanite-Lihyanite (the differential here being chronological, 'Dedanite' applying to the earlier phase, around the mid first millenium B.C., and 'Lihyanite' to a later phase down to the first century A.D.), Safaitic, and the so-called 'Thamudic'. All these terms were originally designed as geographically relevant, and 'Thamudic' was chosen because inscriptions of this type were first encountered in the deserts adjoining Dedan, which were the traditional home of the Tamudeni (Thamud). The term has now, however, become a misnomer, since inscriptions of this type are now known to exist all over the western side of the peninsula as far as and even interpenetrating the borders of the Sayhadic domain; it does not seem credible to me that all these should emanate from the single tribe of the Tamudeni, as Van den Branden [1960] supposed. To mention nothing else [though see Beeston

⁶ Zayd b. 'Ali 'Inān, *Ta'riḥ ḥadārat al-Yaman al-qadim* (Cairo, 1396), 134-5.

⁷ Van LESSEN 24, in Jamme 1971, 86.

⁸ Herodotus' male deity *Orotal* is not conclusive, since this could represent either *ha-Rudā* or *ar-Rudā*.

1962], it would involve the bizarre supposition that this tribe alone possessed the art of writing, to the exclusion of Maddeni (Ma'add), Gorrhamitae (Jurhum), Kinaedokolpitae (Kinanah) and other folks.

So far, one might plausibly have concluded that the *h(n)* article was an old west-Arabian feature, forming an isoglossic continuum with the Hebrew article, and that (')*l* was an eastern feature which has driven out the western form, in the same way that the 'eastern' pronunciation of *hamz* has become generalized in Arabic, replacing (partially at least) the ancient Hijazi pronunciations [Rabin 1951, 130-45]. A puzzling fact, however, is that the tombstones of the al-Ḥasā' region on the east coast [Jamme 1966; Mandaville 1963], perhaps dateable to around 400 B.C.⁹, show no trace of (')*l* but do have *hn* in proper names. Jamme's explanation of this element as a *scriptio defectiva* for *hawn* «mildness» might perhaps have had some plausibility if it had been attested only in combination with a divine name, but it is surely contradicted by the name (J 1044) *hn'bd* which can hardly be anything else than the equivalent of Arabic *al-'abd*. Hence [...]*rmhn'lt* (J 1043) should be seen not as a compositum from three different roots (an onomastic feature hardly, if at all, attested outside Akkadian), but as something like «exaltation of the goddess»¹⁰. A possible solution of the puzzle is to suppose that these tombstones are the monuments of an immigrant group of west-Arabians operating the east-west trade route by way of the W. Sirhān.

Texts displaying the (')*l* article are very scanty in number, but three of them are of outstanding importance. Probably the earliest is a funerary inscription at Qaryat al-Faw (near Sulayyil and on the caravan road linking Najran with the east coast), written in fine monumental South Arabian script palaeographically suggesting a third century A.D. date [Beeston 1979]. Next is the funerary inscription of king Umru' al-Qays at Nemara in the Syrian desert, dated 328 A.D. and written in a rather distinctive script which shows affinities with Nabataean script, and is of a North-west Semitic type with restricted complement of letters (e.g. not distinguishing *d* from *ḏ*, *s* from *š*, etc.) [Beeston 1979]. Third is a bilingual Greek-Arabic building text from Harran in the desert south-east of

⁹ This is based on the palaeography; but the script-style might be an archaizing one, and the date correspondingly somewhat later.

¹⁰ The immediately preceding lacuna, however, allows the possibility that another letter may have preceded, and so the root of this element in the name might be something different.

Damascus¹¹, dated 568 A.D. and in a script which already shows the marks of emerging Arabic script [Littmann 1912, 193]. The striking thing about all these is that, in spite of the vast geographical gap between Faw on the one hand and Nemara and Harran on the other, they are remarkably homogeneous linguistically and drafted in what is recognisably almost pure 'classical' Arabic.

There are three other texts, from Zebed [Littmann 1912, 196-7], J. Usays [al-'Ušš 1964, 302 and no. 107, Pl. 85] and Umm al-Jimāl [Littmann 1949, 1-3], all in the northern area, which are in the same type of script as the Harran one and all similarly dated in the sixth century A.D. All six can be reasonably classified as 'early Arabic'.

More speculative is the case of the graffiti from a Nabataean temple in W. Ramm in southern Jordan [Grimme 1936, 93-4], which are of uncertain dating; Grimme's 'around 300' is regarded by Diem [1979, 210] as too early. Lastly, there is a funerary inscription at al-'Ulā' [Jaussen 1914, ii.423-7, no 71] classed by the first editors as Lihyanite on the basis of the script, yet it contains the Arabic article in *blhgr* «in al-Hijr» (Nabataean Aramaic *hgr'*, Greco-Latin *Egra*), and in some other respects yields more easily to an interpretation as Arabic than as Lihyanite [Beeston 1973]. On the other hand, it also contains the tribal name *hn'hnikt* in Lihyanite form. The same name is also found in CIH 450 in its Arabic form, since *'l'l'hnikt* can hardly be interpreted otherwise than as *āl al-'ahnikat* «the folk of al-Ahnikat»; the original provenance of this text is uncertain, though it should be remarked that its introductory formula *nafs wa qabr* «funerary monument and grave» is typical of central and east Arabian funerary practice and not very characteristic of the Sayhadic culture, being somewhat rare there (the monumental South Arabian script of CIH 450 is, as the example of the Faw texts shows, no guarantee of Sayhadic provenance).

Genuine Sayhadic texts seem to refer to central and eastern Arabians arbitrarily either in their native form with the (')*l* article, or with the Sayhadic equivalent *-n*¹². The al-Asd tribe (later to become known as al-Azd) appear in J 635/37 [Jamme 1962] as *'l's¹d* and in the Minaic RES 2959/4 as *'hl/[']s¹dn*. In these cases the reference is certainly to Azd al-

¹¹ This is of course not the famous Harran of the Sabians (*Ṣābi'ah*) in northern Mesopotamia.

¹² 'Sabaization' of a North-Arabian name in another way is found in CIH 541/91 where the well-known Ghassanid, Ḥārith b. Jabalah, appears as *hr̥m/bn/gblt* with the Sabaic termination *-m*, very common in proper names.

Sarāt; but RES 4916 is Hadramitic and its 's¹dn perhaps refers to the branch which was later to become the Azd 'Umān. A problematic case is the reference in Sharafaddin 31/9-10 to a certain Mālik b. Ka'ab *mlkl's¹d*, which W. W. Müller [1974] interprets as «king of al-Asd», though I myself was inclined to think that the *l* is a misreading for the lacking word-divider, and that the tribe in question is the Najdite Asad which never has the article (Müller has since informed me that the *l* is certain). None of these texts can be dated much earlier than 200 A.D.

For the period down to about that date, the only evidence we have for the Arabic article is the unlocalisable Herodotean notice, and the insecurely dateable and problematic Egra reference. The *h(n)* article is attested widely in western Arabia, and in the Hasaeen tombstones. Nevertheless, this is sufficient to suggest the existence of two linguistic communities using different forms of the article, but geographically interpenetrating with each other to some degree.

After about 200 A.D. more specimens of the Arabic article begin to turn up, but hundreds of Safaitic and 'Thamudic' graffiti with the *h(n)* article still appear, though up to what point is highly uncertain; some have thought that they range right down into the sixth century, but this seems to me unlikely in view of the fact that the Muslim scholars were evidently unaware that such a speech-form had ever existed. By 500 A.D. it seems likely that the whole population of centre and north — and perhaps considerable areas in the south-west as well — was speaking 'Arabic'. But earlier than that, the Faw texts, and the Sayhadic references to the Arabic article, seem to show again (as with the period down to 200 A.D.) a linguistic mosaic in the peninsula.

No satisfactory general term for the *h(n)* group has yet been devised. The designation 'proto-Arabic' cannot avoid suggesting a direct genetic evolution from this group to Arabic as we know it, which is difficult to reconcile with the chronological coexistence, over many centuries, of the two linguistic communities, and particularly with the fact that the Faw and Nemara inscriptions show already something very like a fully evolved 'classical' Arabic at the same time that the 'Thamudic' graffiti, if we can trust accepted datings, were still flourishing and attesting a markedly different linguistic stage. Even the late Lihyanite texts, only a couple of centuries earlier than the Faw ones, are vastly more difficult to interpret than those, and full of obscurities.

In grappling with this problem, it may be illuminating to consider the position of Himyaritic (as known to the Muslim scholars) in relation to Arabic. The philologists have recorded for us several features of

Himyaritic, two being conspicuously deviant from Arabic: the use of a definite article *am-*, and a verbal inflexion *fa'alka*, *fa'alki*, *fa'alku*¹³. Moreover, they display distinct tendencies in the direction of treating Himyaritic as an independent language rather than as a dialect of Arabic on the same plane as the other dialectal variations they record. In describing dialects elsewhere they match these against the standards of high-prestige 'Arabiyyah and classify them as 'pure', 'good', 'not bad' and 'poor'; but in dealing with the south-west they speak of 'pure Arabic', 'inferior Arabic mixed with Himyaritic' and 'pure Himyaritic' [Rabin 1951, specially map on p. 46]. Al-Jāhiz¹⁴ refers to dialectal variation (*taḥāluḥ*) between such typical tribal groups as Tamīm, Qays¹⁵, Hawāzin and the Hijaz, but then goes on to say that all these collectively stand opposed to Himyarite (*hiya fī akṭarihā 'alā hīlāfi luḡati Himyar*). At the present day, the abovementioned two features of ancient Himyaritic are still to be found in some speech-forms of the southern end of the west-Arabian mountain spine, though in other respects it would not be possible to classify these as other than Arabic dialects [Diem 1973]. What has happened is a gradual convergence between ancient Himyaritic and ancient Arabic, leading ultimately to the disappearance of the individual status of Himyaritic but with the retention of a few of its archaic features.

The philologists have also recorded the *am-* article in a few west-central areas, such as Murrah in the vicinity of Medina, and this led Rabin [1951, 35] to infer that it is 'common west-Arabian'; this, however, seems a slight over-simplification, in that it does not take account of the heavy dominance of the *h(n)* article in exactly those areas.

My tentative suggestion is that we should distinguish (a) ancient north-west Arabian, with article *h(n)-*; (b) ancient north-east (?) Arabian, with article (*'*)*l*; (c) ancient south-west Arabian, split into two branches, the Sayhadic type with article *-n* and the Himyaritic type with article *am-*; (d) ancient west-central Arabian of an indeterminate character constituting a mosaic of north-west, south-west (Himyaritic), and perhaps also some north-eastern, speech forms. In course of time

¹³ This type of verbal inflexion, however, may have been shared with Sayhadic.

¹⁴ *Manāqib al-Turk*, in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn (Cairo 1962), I, 10.

¹⁵ I have doubts whether the author really referred here to the famous Qays 'Aylān, since Hawāzin were only a subdivision of these. A much neater arrangement would be secured by the supposition that this is a scribal error for 'Abd Qays, a less known tribe on the east coast around al-Qaṭīf; this would produce a pair of easterners and a pair of westerners, each pair comprising (chiasmically) one *fasīh* group and one speaking a dialect regarded as less correct.

(though the chronology is impossible to determine), the Sayhadic form has disappeared completely as regards its individual morphological features, though its lexicon has continued to exercise a strong influence; and the remaining speech-forms have converged so as to produce the amalgam of dialects which can properly be called Arabic. One of the effects of this convergence has been total elimination of the *h(n)* article in favour of the (ʾ) form, and the present-day restriction of the *am*-article to a few isolated pockets in Yemen.

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