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# Re-engaging Comparative Semitic and Arabic Studies

Edited by  
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## Preface

Already about fifty years ago, the late Edward Ullendorff lamented the fact that the interests of people working in the field of Semitic languages have often become diverted from comparative and historical linguistics to other spheres of interest. He noted that “Arabists with a concern for other Semitic languages gave way to *islamisants* who were bound to step outside the area of Semitics and seek contacts with other Islamic languages, such as Persian or Turkish, which had very disparate linguistic affiliations.”<sup>1</sup>

Even as Arabic linguistics, especially the growing interest in Arabic dialectology and internal subgrouping, grew to become a field in its own right, Arabists by and large avoided engaging with Semitic philology and linguistics. A sub-field that was once at the core of Semitic studies, with scholars such as Theodor Nöldeke, Carl Brockelmann, Edward Ullendorff, Joshua Blau and many others, veered away from engaging with the non-contemporary languages of the region, potentially losing linguistic and cultural context.

This has resulted in a situation, in which Semitic languages are studied in many academic institutions almost exclusively within the framework of individual fields, for example Arabic in institutions for Arabic and Islamic studies, Hebrew and Aramaic in divinity schools and institutes for Jewish studies, or Syriac and Ethiopic in departments studying Eastern Christianity. Even in cases, where several Semitic languages are studied in near vicinity to each other due to the co-existence of respective infrastructures, cross-departmental cooperation of a linguistic nature is rare. At the same time, institutes dedicated to comparative Semitic philology have become increasingly rare, and as a result fewer scholars are trained in the discipline.

Recognizing the importance and need of rooting philological research on Arabic Islamic texts within a solid linguistic framework, the organizers of the congress “Horizons of Islamic Theology” which took place in September 1 – 5, 2014, at the Institute for the Study of Islamic Culture and Religion at the Goethe-University in Frankfurt, wished to take a stand against this trend and included a section on Comparative Semitic and Arabic Studies. This section consisted of three panels, “Arabic in Context”, “Arabic and Semitic: How Archaic Is the *fuṣḥā*?” and “New Insights in Arabic Syntax”.

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1 Ullendorff, Edward. “Comparative Semitics”. In *Linguistics in South West Asia and North Africa*. (Current trends in linguistics 6). Edited by Thomas A. Sebeok. The Hague: Mouton, 1970, 263.

This section attempted to highlight the benefits of a linguistic and comparative engagement of Arabic with other regional languages and societies for an improved understanding of Early Islam and its literary heritage.

The articles collected in this volume largely emerged from the papers presented at these three panels. They are ordered alphabetically and cover an area reaching from general and comparative Afro-Asiatic linguistics to South Arabian phonology to diachronic and synchronic Arabic linguistics. Despite the diversity of their topics, the contributions all illuminate various ways in which a re-engagement with comparative Semitic and Arabic linguistics can benefit research on Arabic Islamic texts.

Ahmad Al-Jallad explores what linguistic features are diagnostic of Ancient North-Arabian. He discusses previous definitions of Arabic and the classification of languages commonly bundled as Ancient North-Arabian with regard to shared isoglosses. Al-Jallad contextualizes the various dialects both in relation to Arabic and to West Semitic and offers a novel understanding of Ancient Arabia and its linguistic borders.

Daniel Birnstiel investigates the meaning of the Qur'anic term *mubīn* and additional related terms from a synchronic perspective. He shows how these terms have often been misinterpreted both by Muslim exegetes and modern scholars and suggests several emendations to the text of the Qur'an. Evidence from other Semitic languages assists in entangling this issue.

The contribution by Lutz Edzard discusses various functions of the Arabic accusative from a comparative Semitic and Afro-Asiatic perspective. He demonstrates that many of the cases attested in Arabic grammar can be much better understood and made sense of when regarded as cases of a marked nominative within the larger Afro-Asiatic and Semitic framework.

Phillip Stokes traces the history of the common Arabic dialectal relative marker *illī* and its variants. After rejecting previous explanations connecting *illī* and variants to the Classical Arabic relative *allāḏī* on linguistic grounds, he adduces evidence suggesting a derivation from the definite article *\*al* followed by a plural demonstrative *\*'ulay*. In the process, Stokes reconstructs the demonstrative in Arabic and contextualizes it within Semitic.

Janet Watson and Abdullah al-Mahri take a close look at word stress in Mehri from the perspective of Stratal Optimality Theory. They show how the complexity of the rules determining Mehri word stress may convincingly be analyzed as the combination of lexical stress and the interaction of constraints functioning at different levels.

Our thanks are due to the organizers of the congress "Horizons of Islamic Theology" and the Institute for the Study of Islamic Culture and Religion, especially Ömer Özsoy and Udo Simon, to Lutz Edzard, to the editor-in-chief

of Harrassowitz Verlag, Barbara Krauss, and to the editor of the series *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, Florian C. Reiter, who made the publication of this volume possible. Finally, the editors wish to thank all the young dragons in their life, real and imaginary.

Frankfurt and Austin, October 2018

Daniel Birnstiel and Na'ama Pat-El

# What is Ancient North Arabian?<sup>1</sup>

Ahmad Al-Jallad, The Ohio State University, Columbus

## 1 Introduction

The biggest barrier to understanding the linguistic diversity of pre-Islamic Arabia has traditionally been the dearth of sources. Scholars had only the fragmentary accounts of medieval Muslim scholars to rely upon. These presented the Arabian Peninsula as more or less linguistically homogenous – Arabic was spoken across its vast territory, with the exception of the southwestern corner where Ḥimyaritic still held sway. And even the few surviving remarks about Ḥimyaritic made it seem like an exotic Arabic dialect rather than an independent language.<sup>2</sup> While the Arabic grammarians recorded a significant degree of dialectal variation in the Arabic of their time, their accounts gave little reason to suspect that Arabic was not the language of Arabia's tribespeople since time immemorial.

The exploration of the Arabian Peninsula and adjacent parts of the southern Levant beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century remedied the problem of sources. Tens of thousands of inscriptions in varieties of the South Semitic script, spanning the entire Peninsula, provided a new vista from which to study Arabia's once pre-history. Medieval references to Ḥimyaritic had accustomed scholars to viewing ancient Yemen as linguistically distinct from the rest of the Peninsula. The epigraphic evidenced corroborated this, but rather than attesting a single, ancient Ḥimyaritic language, Ancient South Arabia was home to at least four distinct languages, spanning from the early first millennium BCE until the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>3</sup> None of these languages could be considered Arabic in any sense,

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1 Editorial signs for inscriptions are: [restored letter]; {damaged letter}; / word divider; // line break; the glottal stop (hamza) is represented as ʔ in phonological and phonetic transcription and as ʾ when transcribing the glyphs of an inscriptions; the same goes for the pharyngeal fricative ʕayn, ʕ and ʕ, respectively.

2 For an excellent discussion on the relationship between the medieval Ḥimyaritic and the epigraphic record of the pre-Islamic kingdom of Ḥimyar, see Stein (2008). The classic reference for the features of Medieval Ḥimyaritic is Rabin (1951); for a more recent discussion, see Robin (2007).

3 On the chronology of Ancient South Arabian, see Stein (2013), Drewes et al. (2013).

and none matched the “Himyariyyah” of medieval Islamic sources. The exact relationship between the Ancient South Arabian languages continues to be debated by specialists as does their position, as a whole or individually, within the Semitic family.<sup>4</sup>

The problems of classifying Ancient South Arabian, however, are not the subject of the present essay; it is the more fragmentary inscriptions and shadowy languages of Central and North Arabian that concern us. Unlike Ancient South Arabia, where the epigraphic languages are preserved in monumental inscriptions, the inscriptions of Central and North Arabia are usually classified as graffiti; in fact, only those texts composed at the oasis of Dadān in the Higāz appear to have been commissioned by their nominal authors.<sup>5</sup>

The inscriptions of Central and North Arabia differ from South Arabia in another important respect: while a single script was used across Ancient South Arabia to write various languages, Central and North Arabia attest a stunning variety of alphabets, the exact number of which remains unknown. The informal and laconic nature of these texts has posed considerable problems for the classification of their scripts and has made linguistic diagnosis sometimes impossible. The first successful attempt at classification was that of Winnett (1937), which divided the scripts of Central and North Arabia into categories of “Thamudic”<sup>6</sup> A through E, to which were added “Liḥyanite” (= Dadanitic) and Safaitic, forming seven script groupings. Winnett, however, did not embark on a linguistic classification and it is clear that he regarded the language behind all of these alphabets as more or less homogenous.

In a seminal paper, M.C.A. Macdonald (2000) established the conventional terminology for the scripts and languages of the Arabian Peninsula before Islam used today. For North and Central Arabia, Macdonald distinguished the following categories of the South Semitic script, based on whether they were employed at an oasis or by nomads (see Map 1 on page 36), and two linguistic groupings, Ancient North Arabian and Arabic.<sup>7</sup>

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4 For the classic discussion, see Avanzini (2009). For balanced discussions on the linguistic classification of Ancient South Arabian within Semitic, see Huehnergard 1995; Huehnergard and Rubin 2011; Rubin 200.

5 On this phenomenon, see Macdonald (2010; 2015).

6 The term “Thamudic” is entirely conventional; there is no demonstrable link between the historical tribe of Thamūd and all of the inscriptions placed under this label, although a few texts can be connected to members of this tribe.

7 The South Semitic script is a conventional term for the family of alphabets used in Arabia before the rise of Islam, ranging from 27 to 29 glyphs. See also Macdonald (2010) for a good introduction to their history and Sass (1991) on their possible development.

Ancient North Arabian		
Oasis North Arabian	Taymanitic (formerly Thamudic A)	Oasis of Taymā', North Arabia
	Dadanitic (formerly Dadanite and Lihyanite)	Oasis of Dadān, northern Ḥigāz
	Dumaitic	Oasis of Dūmah, North Arabia
	Dispersed North Arabian	Texts from Mesopotamia and other places not classifiable as one of the above scripts
Desert North Arabian	Safaitic	Syro-Jordanian basalt desert, northern Saudi Arabia, isolated finds elsewhere
	Hismaic (formerly Thamudic E)	Southern Jordan, northern Saudi Arabia
	Thamudic B	North and Central Arabia
	Thamudic C	North and Central Arabia
	Thamudic D	North and Northwest Arabia
	Southern Thamudic	Southwest Arabia
Arabic		
Old Arabic	Pre-Islamic 'l-dialects attested in various scripts	Attested in various places, but concentrated in North Arabia and southern Levant