

## THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

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The Arabic language today is the mother tongue of over 200 million people across the Middle East and North Africa. Its modern standard representation, whose form is ultimately derived from the Classical Arabic idiom, is officially adopted as the primary language of administration, education, and discourse in countries as diverse as Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Egypt, the Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, notwithstanding the significance of the language's official status in neighboring states such as Mauritania, Chad, Djibouti, and Somalia. There are marked variations among the varieties of spoken Arabic: distinctions between the colloquial vernaculars and modern standard Arabic remain obvious. These clusters of vernaculars are said to have originally existed alongside the esteemed classical idiom and were disseminated as the result of the resettlement of Arab tribes following the Islamic conquests of the seventh century; a continuum of affinity therefore defines their Arabic status. Nonetheless, the Arabic language does not serve solely as an integral symbol of Arab national identity; it also functions as the revered language of the religion of Islam, occupying a sacrosanct place in the religious psyche of Muslims. The sacred book of Islam, the Qur'ān, was revealed in the Arabic language and everyday ritual observances are likewise articulated in its diction. Given that adherents of the faith number around one-fifth of the world's population, the symbolic compass of the Arabic language remains altogether pervasive. It must also be borne in mind that for many Christians in the Middle East, Arabic too has liturgical importance, serving as the language of religious ceremonies and services. The widespread migration of Arab and Muslim peoples into all parts of the Western world has further brought the Arabic language into focus as a unifying symbol of cultural and religious identity. A corollary to this is that varying levels of interaction with the language take place in social, cultural, and religious contexts; Arabic is taught in religious seminaries, mosques, and schools. Moreover, the study of Arabic has long been on the curriculum of academic institutions in the West. Chairs for the study of Arabic were established in reputable centers of learning such as the Collège de France in 1539 and the University of Leiden in the Netherlands in 1613. Oxford and Cambridge both had Chairs of Arabic created in the 1630s; and academic interest in the language and religion continues to thrive. Yet, the place of Arabic in the world of Islam is defined by a lengthy and intricate historical odyssey which begins with its position among the Semitic languages.

### Semitic nexus

Arabic belongs to the family of languages traditionally identified as being Semitic, a term coined in the late eighteenth century CE and inspired by the Book of Genesis's account of the physical dispersal of the descendants of Noah together with the "tongues" they spoke. Semitic languages are members of the Afro-Asiatic (Hamito-Semitic) phylum of languages. Emphasizing the geographical bearing of this label, Semiticists use it to map out a typological classification of the syntactic, morphological, phonological, and lexical features which are collectively defined to be characteristic of these languages. These traits include triliterality (many of the morphemes of Arabic are traced to a trilateral root), parataxis (the omission of conjunctions in clauses), the appendage of conjugational markers, and resemblances in the lexical repertoire of the languages in question. The suggestion is that these languages branched out from a common root, namely a proto-Semitic archetype, although the schema was inspired by earlier efforts to postulate the proto-type of the family of Indo-European languages. In the attempts to reconstruct the proto-Semitic language, great significance was attached to the language of Arabic: it was the most prolific of the surviving Semitic languages and preserved a profusion of linguistic sources germane to its early development and history.

Despite the differences in opinions regarding the classification of the branches of the Semitic languages and their identification, a tripartite division of Eastern, North West and South Semitic languages is presented by Semiticists to provide some perspective to the linguistic features and affinities shared by languages of the same branch along with their overall relationship with one another. Eastern Semitic comprises the extinct language of Akkadian, which is divided into Old Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian dialects. It employed a cuneiform script which was based on the intricate arrangement and characterization of wedge-shaped imprints on clay and is attested as early as 2400 BCE. North West Semitic (or Western Semitic) principally comprises Ugaritic; Canaanite, a general label covering the Phoenician, Punic, Edomite, Moabite, Ammonite, and Hebrew languages. It also includes Aramaic, which was used in Syria from around 900 BCE. Aramaic became the *lingua franca* of the Near and Middle East, dominating the linguistic landscape of the region until the Islamic conquests of the seventh century when Arabic assumed that role. Aramaic is classed as having Imperial, Standard, and Middle designations. It is further separated into Western and Eastern branches: the Western branch comprises Nabataean, Palmyrene, and a number of dialects spoken in biblical Palestine such as Samaritan and Jewish Aramaic, including the language associated with Christ. Eastern Aramaic includes Syriac and Mandaean among its dialects. The former is significant as the liturgical language of the early Christian church, flourishing at Edessa; while the latter is associated with a Gnostic sect based in Upper Mesopotamia. The South Semitic (or South West Semitic) group brings together the ancient dialects of South Arabia: Sabaeen, Minaean, and Qatabanian; the Pre-Islamic Northern Arabian languages of Thamudic, Lihyanite, Safaitic, and Hasaeen, which is associated with central eastern parts of the Arabian peninsula; and the Ethiopian languages of Ge'ez, Amharic, Tigrina, and Tigre. Although Arabic used to be enumerated among the South Semitic group of languages, there has been a recent tendency to place it among the North West Semitic languages on the basis that it shares greater grammatical affinities with them (see fig. 1). The

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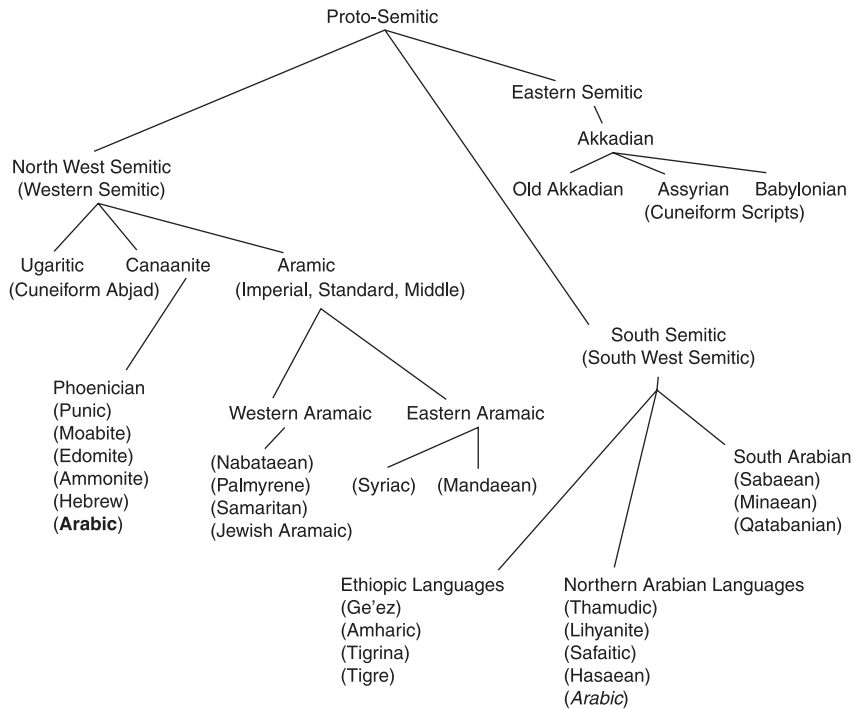


Figure 1 Semitic languages.

historical homeland of the proto-Semitic peoples has been a subject of debate: one view is that the Syrian plains once served as their original abode. Groups of migrants are said to have left the sedentary settlements of Syria and moved southwards, adopting a living as desert-dwelling nomads; the progressive migratory waves are said to have continued over a period of time, resulting in the physical distribution of the proto-Semitic language. In addition, there are also separate opinions which respectively identify North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula as original homelands of the proto-Semitic peoples. The shared affinities among the Semitic languages are supposedly an intricate result of gradual but decisive geographical diffusion, although the fact that each of the languages in question undergoes complex stages of development and is subject to a range of substrate influences renders such theories as being speculative. Furthermore, Semiticists generally favor playing down the hypothetical nature of the genetic link among the languages in question, choosing to focus instead on the typological similarities among these languages.

### Towards the emergence of the classical Arabic language and script

Traditional Islamic sources divide the Arabian Peninsula into three broad geographical regions: Tihama, Hijaz, and Najd. Tihāma comprises the vast tracts of territory which run along the Red Sea coast reaching as far south as Yemen. Its northern

edges are contiguous with the southern Mesopotamian desert plains. The central coastal plains of Tihāma blend into the region of Ḥijāz, which includes the towns of Mecca and Medina, extending eastwards, where it is bounded by the central plateau of the area known as Najd and its surrounding terrain. Arabic in the form of its many dialects was spoken in these regions alongside an elevated diction (Classical Arabic) which was retained for very formal contexts. The Arabs are mentioned in a range of sources from antiquity: Biblical, Greek, and Persian materials all refer to their presence in the geographical area designated as the Arabian Peninsula. Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform inscriptions dated to the ninth century BCE provide a number of references telling of dealings with Arabs from the northern desert regions of the peninsula bordering the Fertile Crescent. These so-called ʿArībi were known for their nomadic way of life, although many of them sought a sedentary existence in oasis settlements. Many settled in northern and central regions of the peninsula and were ancestors of those Arabs who were historical witnesses to the birth of Islam. During the second millennium BCE, the southwest region of the peninsula was home to a high-level material culture: archaeological finds such as temples, dams, and elaborate watercourses confirm its cultural sophistication in the world of antiquity. The southern Arabian states organized the ancient trade routes which traversed the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula and the eastern expanses. These routes connected the Mediterranean countries with the Far and Near East. Mecca and Medina were both settlements situated near the ancient trade routes, although in the case of the former town it was also the home of a pre-eminent religious shrine, the Kaʿba, to which pilgrims flocked. Bedouin Arabs had played a key role in the movement of commodities and goods: they settled in oases and stations along the ancient routes. The language of the south was sharply distinguished from the Classical Arabic idiom employed by the Arabs at the dawn of Islam. It had also developed an elegant script, which is referred to as epigraphic South Arabian, due to its being preserved on durable materials such as stone, ceramics, coins, and metals. It was apparently derived from a proto-Canaanite archetype. The South Arabian script, which originally comprised 29 consonants, adopted a right to left format, although there do exist inscriptions in which a boustrophedon convention is followed with lines being written alternately in a right to left, left to right direction. Some South Arabian inscriptions clearly adhere to a left to right convention. The Ethiopic scripts of Geʿez, Amharic, and Tigre were developed from this South Arabian archetype and actually adopted a left to right convention.

Numerous monumental inscriptions and graffiti found along the ancient trade routes and in northern and eastern areas of the Arabian peninsula utilized the South Arabian script. These include inscriptions associated with the Northern Arabian languages of Thamudic, Lihyanite, Hasaeen, and lastly Safaitic, of which there exist some 15,000 inscriptions. Certain correspondences existed between the vocabulary of the northern Arabic languages and Classical Arabic of the late pre-Islamic period. The pre-Islamic Northern languages, which are often designated as Proto-Arabic, are theoretically considered somewhat distant ancestors of Classical Arabic. Some of the Thamudic inscriptions, which are rather short, can be dated as early as the sixth century BCE, while even the Lihyanite inscriptions have an early provenance, dating to around the fifth century BCE. The definite article in these scripts followed a convention established in southern Arabian languages, namely the use of (*h*) and (*hn*). Later

inscriptions dated to the second and third centuries CE reveal that (*al*) was used to represent the definite article. Proper names and loanwords from inscriptions found within the pagan kingdoms of the Nabataeans and the Palmyrenes, who had their respective capitals at Petra (in modern-day Jordan) and Palmyra (in modern-day Syria) use (*al*) as the definite article. The Nabataeans and the Palmyrenes are identified as Arabs who developed a highly sophisticated culture. Petra was annexed by the Byzantines in 106 CE, while Palmyra was destroyed in 274 CE. The decline of these kingdoms, which was coupled with the steady economical and political demise of the southern Arabian entities, ushered in a prolonged period of rivalry between the Persian and Byzantine empires. This culminated in several wars which were fought between the fourth and sixth centuries CE. A number of Arab tribes had served as vassals for the warring empires: the Lakhmids served the Persians at Hira, an important center for the dissemination of Christianity, while the Ghassanids performed a similar function for the Byzantines in Syria. In the case of the Nabataeans, they spoke a variety of Arabic which was a precursor of Classical Arabic, despite employing the Aramaic script and language as their formal *lingua franca*. This is noteworthy as the Arabic script which appears in later inscriptions was apparently based on a Nabataean–Aramaic model. This earlier model had developed both monumental and cursive forms. Cursive and linear scripts were evolved to facilitate writing, breaking away from the rigid physical strictures imposed by monumental characters; ligatures were devised to join the separate consonants, giving them, where appropriate, initial, medial, and terminal forms. The Arabic script was to make vital use of these qualities.

One inscription which is considered important for gauging the historical crystallization of Classical Arabic and its script is the funerary epitaph found at Namara 120 km southeast of Damascus. Devoted to a Lakhmid king by the name of Imru `l-Qays, it is preserved in a script which scholars view as being one of the earliest forms of the developing Arabic orthography. Moreover, its language significantly reveals distinct affinities with the Classical Arabic idiom which defined the literary tradition of the post-Islamic epoch, although Aramaic loan words do feature in this epitaph. However, the Raqūsh tombstone from Madā'in Šāliḥ in the northwest region of the Arabian peninsula, which is dated to 267 CE, has been cited by some scholars in terms of its furnishing early evidence of the development of Classical Arabic and its script (Healey and Smith 1989: 77). A first-century inscription discovered in `En `Avdat in the Negev and dated to the first century CE has even led some researchers to countenance a much earlier historical stage in the emergence of language and script. Additional pre-Islamic inscriptions examined in this context include a tombstone from Umm al-Jimal (250 CE), which lies south west of Bosra in Syria; the Jabal Ramm (300–350 CE) inscription from a Nabataean temple near the sea port of al-`Aqaba in Jordan; the trilingual inscription found on a lintel at Zabad (512 CE) near Aleppo; an inscription located in a church at Umm al-Jimal (520 CE) in Jordan; a reference to a military expedition of a Ghassanid king found at Jabal Usas (528 CE) south east of Damascus; and an inscription referring to the erection of a martyrrium in Harran (568 CE).

One has to concede that the early inscriptions provide only fleeting glimpses of the historical emergence of the Arabic language in the pre-Islamic period and the evolution of its script, although one scholar concludes that among the Arabs from the first century CE onwards, a language closely related to Classical Arabic was in use (Versteegh 2001: 35). The paucity of surviving epigraphic and paleographical evidence has led to

suggestions that writing was not widespread among the Arabs of the late pre-Islamic period; and, that the literary tradition must have remained essentially oral in character, although the sophistication and maturity of the Classical Arabic idiom are not in dispute. Many scholars argue that the rudimentary nature of available writing materials was not conducive to the spread of writing. These materials included parchment, papyrus, the ribs and shoulder-blades of animals, the stalks of palms, ostraca (fragments of pottery), linen, thin pieces of limestone, and vellum, which was rather expensive. Nevertheless, it is striking that the symbols of literacy are freely accentuated in the Qur'ān, which pre-eminently serves as one of the earliest written sources in Arabic. Indeed, references to scribes, scrolls, scripts, parchment, writing, books, ink, recitation, and indeed the (reed) pen permeate the sacred text. Historical treatments of the biography of the Prophet also refer to the transcription of pacts, transactions, and the dispatch of correspondences; and this is similarly true in chronologies of the post-prophetic periods. Modern scholarship is of the view that at the time of Islam's appearance the Arabic language possessed a highly elevated diction. The rhetorical flair imposingly displayed in the composition of the Qur'ān serves as testimony to that fact. Classical Islamic scholarship argued that proof of the text's divine origin rested in its matchless linguistic style. Poetry had been an important vehicle for literary expression among the Arabs. In the late pre-Islamic period, its composition had reached significant levels of sophistication; odes were composed in intricately rhymed verse and there existed an impressive range of poetic metres and thematic formats from which poets could select. All of which imply that a perceptive appreciation of literary refinement existed among the Arabs at the time of the Qur'ān's revelation. The Qur'ān deliberately dissociates its style and arrangement from that of classical poetry, declaring that it was not the "word of a poet." The emphasis of rhetorical eminence appears as an imposing motif in the literature which recounts the life of the Prophet, who is said to have remarked that he was the most eloquent of Arabs, referring to his being reared among Bedouin Arabs. In their empirical quest to define the perfect Arabic diction, early grammarians and philologists sought out the modes of parlance and linguistic predilections of Bedouin Arabs. They were used as one of the sources for the codification of Arabic grammar.

### **Linguistic impact of the Islamic conquests**

In the seventh century, the advent of Islam and the rapid Muslim conquests of vast swathes of territory across the Near and Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, consequently followed by their assimilation, settlement, and administration placed the Arabs along with their language and faith onto a much broader religious, social, political, and geographical stage. The conquests ultimately brought together a miscellany of peoples, faiths, traditions, and cultures all of which intermingled to facilitate the conditions for the materialization of a civilization shaped by the overarching constructs of a monotheistic creed. This civilization, which had centers in locations as culturally and ethnically diverse as Cordoba and Seville in Andalusia, the Island of Sicily in the Mediterranean, Damascus in Syria, Baghdad in Iraq, Cairo in Egypt, Nishapur in Persia, and Samarqand and Bukhara beyond the Oxus, was receptive to a wide gamut of influences, although the language of Arabic remained the defining feature of its political, cultural, and religious identity. Much of this civilization's literary

achievements were articulated, refined, and preserved through the language of Arabic. During the rule of the Umayyad caliph, ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 685–705), Arabic was made the official language of administration (700). It was employed throughout Muslim controlled territory, achieving the status akin to that enjoyed by Aramaic in the pre-Islamic periods. New converts, and more crucially, their offspring adopted the Arabic language as their mother tongue. The language became a unifying symbol of religious identity and in many instances, indigenous languages were eclipsed by Arabic’s prominence due to its being the language of state and religion. Even with the fragmentation of the Islamic polity (the Abbasids, who ruled from 749–1258, had become a nominal authority giving way to independent dynasties and principalities), Arabic retained, at the very least, the status of being the language of faith. For example, in the tenth century the dynasty of the Samanids, who ruled in eastern part of Persia, replaced Arabic with Persian as their language of culture and administration; and, the renaissance of the symbols of Persian identity was also promoted by the Safavids in the sixteenth century. They elevated Shiʿism as the official religion of state. Yet, even within these confines, Arabic preserved its role as the language of the faith.

The Islamic tradition, with its monotheistic message and proselytizing ethic, did not distinguish between spiritual and secular spheres of human activity. Throughout the first three centuries of the Islamic tradition, Muslim scholarship produced a detailed system of law and ritual practice which auspiciously engendered rich literary traditions of learning. These were initially formulated to explicate the religious sources: exegesis, law, theology, history, linguistic thought and philosophy, developed as separate fields of learning, while disciplines of a more secular flavor such as astronomy, geometry, alchemy, medicine, mathematics, geography, and logic all flourished. During the rule of the Umayyads (661–749) and their successors the Abbasids, attention was turned towards translating into Arabic much of the medical, scientific, and philosophical heritage of the classical traditions of antiquity. The Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–33), established the famous *Bayt al-ḥikma* (“House of Wisdom”) in Baghdad during 830 for this very purpose. Texts were often retranslated in the pursuit of precision and subsequently furnished with elaborate commentaries. Thus for example, Ptolemy’s *Almagest* and Euclid’s *Elements* were the subject of several translations all aimed at improving the quality of earlier works. In due course, many of these materials entered the sphere of Europe via Islamic Spain: treatises and tracts which had been previously translated into Arabic from Greek and Syriac were rendered into Latin before being studied in Western medieval institutions. Access to these resources was therefore aided via the study of Arabic. It is interesting to note that Peter the Venerable commissioned the first Latin translation of the Qurʾān in 1143; he was behind a project for the translation of Islamic sources. Despite the fact that polemical motives were often behind such enterprises, the ground was laid for scholarly interaction with Arabic in the Western world.

### Traditions of Arabic linguistic thought

The Arabic tradition recognized two classical traditions of linguistic thought. These two traditions were respectively associated with the settlements of Kufa and Basra in Iraq. Much of what is studied in the field of Arabic grammar, philology, lexicography, and prosody has its roots in the traditions of learning cultivated in these two cities,

although the Kūfans were eventually based in Baghdad. Scholarship connected with the Qurʾān appears to have provided the impetus for the developing linguistic sciences. Lexical paraphrase, the collating of variant readings of the Qurʾān, phonological conventions regarding the recitation of the Qurʾān, and even the enumeration of the verses of scripture in codices lay at the heart of these endeavors. A rational schema of thought which formulated rudimentary syntactic constructs designed to elucidate the linguistic configuration and constitution of the sacred text enhanced activities in these interconnected areas. The patterns of speech in the language of the Arabs and their ancient poetry were adduced by these pioneering grammarians to provide the Qurʾānic diction with theoretical context and definition. The integration of all these approaches and methods gave birth to the first systematic attempt to present a theory of the language of the Arabs; and it was a Basran individual by the name of Sibawayhi (d. 796), the son of a Persian convert, who achieved this distinction. His book was named *al-Kitāb* and, over successive centuries, it served as the foundation for the theoretical analysis of Arabic linguistic thought. Attempts to locate an external influence upon the development of Arabic linguistic thought in the form of Greek, Syriac, Pahlavi, and Indian antecedents have never been adequately substantiated. The Kufan and Basran traditions ultimately developed unique methodologies and approaches to the study of the phenomenon of language, although there was a later tendency to accentuate the conceptual and methodological differences between the traditions. However, this should not disguise the swiftness with which the traditions of linguistic thought developed. The literary legacy of these two traditions was promulgated in the different regions of the Islamic world. Many of the traditions' luminaries were the sons of converts who had espoused the new faith. Their contribution was keenly felt in all fields of scholarship. It has been argued that the grammarians had operated on the assumption that there was only one proto-classical idiom – the diction derived from selected Bedouin Arabs – and, given that their informants were principally Arabs from the tribes of Najd in the central eastern heartlands of the Arabian Peninsula, a rather restricted model of the formal idiom emerged. This has led to the view that the purpose of grammar was simply to preserve and emulate this ancient idiom, however, grammatical thought was initially rather descriptive in countenance and concerned with Arabic as a living language, hence the countless references to Bedouin usage in grammatical and philological treatises as a means of giving bearing to morpho-syntactic, phonetic, and phonological axioms. The language of the Qurʾān and poetry critically assisted in the fleshing out of precepts and constructs. It is the case, however, that once a standard of the classical language was defined, it became the yardstick for later grammarians. Medieval biographical literature implies that mistakes by native speakers of Arabic and a failure on the part of converts to attain proficient levels of usage of the language initially prompted scholars to devise simple grammatical models which aimed to assist the learning of Arabic. Linguists did produce texts devoted to the phenomenon of solecisms (*lahn*), which developed as a rich genre of writing. Nevertheless, the earliest literary works in the field of grammatical thought are not strictly pedagogical writings, but decidedly more abstract treatments of language. Over subsequent centuries, the grammatical tradition as a whole took the literary writings and achievements made by scholars during the first four centuries of Arabic linguistic thought and used these as the critical basis for their own endeavors. Such was the profusion of the corpus of sources furnished by the early



grammatical tradition that later scholarship could devote voluminous treatises to defining Classical Arabic, while also offering contrasting as well as complementary paradigms of its features. The originality, creativity, and precision of the early tradition were never quite matched, but its legacy was preserved.

### Classical Arabic idiom and the Qur'ān

Traditional Islamic scholarship held that the Qur'ān was revealed in the Meccan dialect of Quraysh, the tribe to which the Prophet Muḥammad belonged, notionally reflecting western Arabian dialectal influences. The dialect had seemingly assimilated and integrated all that was refined among the various vernaculars of the Arabs. It had supposedly developed into the distinguished *lingua franca*, serving as an elevated diction and the common medium of literary expression. During the early pre-Islamic periods, poetry and the formal discourse of the Arabs were said to have employed this elevated literary *koine*. The impression was that the prominence of Quraysh as the custodians of the Meccan sanctuary gave their native diction a unique seal of authority; that Quraysh were also influential merchants purportedly assisted the linguistic ascendancy of their dialect. However, recent scholarship has questioned the traditional emphasis placed on the significance of Quraysh's dialect, reckoning that although western dialects were represented in the classical idiom, the eastern Arabian dialects associated with the tribes of Najd (Qays, Tamīm, and Asad) practically shaped the definitive form of the Arabs' literary *koine*. Scholars remarked that pre-Islamic poetry dated to the sixth century, which was transmitted orally and codified by philologists much later, had actually been written in this elevated *koine*. The Qur'ān is viewed as being composed in a dialect which encapsulates this *koine*, although idiosyncratic phonological features associated with the Ḥijāzī dialects are likewise retained in its composition. Western Arabian dialects favored the omission (*tashīl*) of glottal stops (*hamza*), except where they occurred at initial or pausal junctures in words and expressions. The Prophet is reported to have praised the fact that glottal stops did not feature in the phonemic repertoire of the dialect of Quraysh. In contradistinction, the eastern dialects favored their inclusion (*taḥqīq*), irrespective of where they occurred in the articulation of a word or expression. The term "believer" would be pronounced by the Ḥijāzīs as *mūmin*; whereas, the eastern tribes would articulate the same term as *mu'min*. The feature of assimilation (*idghām*), in which geminated consonants of a close phonological proximity are vigorously integrated, is identified as an eastern Arabian dialectal predilection; the western dialects favored separating such geminated consonants (*fakk al-idghām*); both phonological traits are found in the Qur'an. A phonological quality referred to as *imāla* ("inclining or fronting of the vowel") was a typical characteristic of the Najdī dialects, whereas, the western dialects preferred the converse quality of *fath* ("opening the vowel"). There are even different conventions adopted by these tribes regarding the gender of selected nouns and further phonological, morphological and syntactic variances which are documented in classical grammatical and philological literature.

Nonetheless, accentuating the predominance of these dialectal traits and their eastern provenance in the literary *koine* should not be allowed to obscure the more imposing question of the compositional features of the Qur'anic text. The Qur'ān consistently asserts the supreme and matchless nature of its literary arrangement. This rests not

simply on subsidiary phonological and phonetic qualities but rather on the stylistic and rhetorical conventions of its linguistic configuration. The doctrine of the Qur'ān's linguistic inimitability (*i'jāz*) inevitably proceeds from a compositional substratum. Qur'anic allusions to the religion's Meccan opponents report that they believed the text resembled the poetry of the Arabs; so one might assume that the Meccans recognized that the Qur'ān's literary arrangement was similar in format to their valued poetic *koine*. The Qur'ān states that the Meccan opponents of the Prophet characterized its early contents as being comprised of "ancient fables," "handed down sorcery," and that the text was essentially "the words of a mortal." Reference is also made to its being comparable to the rhymed utterances of a soothsayer or a man possessed by demons or spirits. Against this background of rejection, the Qur'ān issued a challenge to its Meccan critics. It was based on the premise that the ancient Arabs believed themselves to be paragons of linguistic eloquence and rhetoric. Accordingly, if the contents of the Qur'ān represented the mere words of a mortal, then the Arabs should have been able to match and surpass its linguistic splendor. The Qur'ān states the Arabs were unable to rise to the challenge, demonstrating not only the text's inimitable quality as reflected in its composition and style, but also its divine status as a book of revelation.

Arguments that the Prophet was apparently illiterate are also adduced in classical discourse on the Qur'an's inimitability. There exists an anecdote in which the Prophet remarked of the Arabs "We are an illiterate people; we can neither read nor enumerate." The Qur'ān refers to the Prophet as being *al-nabī al-ummī* (often translated as the "illiterate prophet"). Recently, discussions have persisted concerning the etymology of this term and whether it actually connotes a gentile. Classical scholarship imported the issue of the illiteracy of the Prophet into the equation of the Qur'ān's inimitability. The irony was all too apparent: the Arabs were paragons of linguistic eloquence and claimed the Qur'ān was the composition of an unlettered individual yet they were unable to match it. This led medieval scholars to argue that the Qur'ān's miraculous nature resided in the composition of the text (*naẓm*); its style had broken previous literary conventions with which the Arabs were familiar. One figure who helped refine the subtleties of the doctrine of *i'jāz* was the theologian and jurist Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), although enterprising discussions on this subject had been broached much earlier among theologians. Indeed, a figure by the name of al-Nazzām (d. 836) claimed that the miracle (*i'jāz*) was not the linguistic inimitability of the text per se but rather the fact that the Arabs had been prevented from producing a text to match it; they had the capacity to do that but God had prevented them from doing so! The doctrine was called (*ṣarfā*), namely deflection or prevention. Bāqillānī and others argued that the gist of this concept made the act of "prevention" the miracle and not the unique literary composition of the text. Over ensuing centuries later scholarship refined an astute synthesis of all these various arguments when formalizing the doctrine of *i'jāz*.

Simple linguistic constructs often played a profound role in the fleshing out of theological dogma. An excellent case in point is the infamous episode of the inquisition (*miḥna*). A group of theologians known as the Mu'tazilites, who were renowned for having refined rational approaches to the interpretation of religious doctrines, employing modes of thought and argumentation derived from Greek philosophical thought, had promoted the belief that the Qur'ān was in essence a created document.

Orthodoxy had championed the view that God was a speaker in the literal sense of the word, advocating that the Qur'ān encapsulated His veridical expression in the language of Arabic. They further postulated that speech (*kalām*), as manifested in the Qur'ān, was one of His eternal attributes. According to Mūʿtazilite reasoning, such a view predicated that God had a physical organ with which to articulate words and thereby conceptually compromised the nature of His transcendent status. It led them to formulate an abstract proposition which posited that God was not a speaker in the literal sense of the word, but rather he created speech temporally. They persuaded the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–33) to adopt this doctrine as an official creed, having those who refused to accept it imprisoned. There are also instances in which theological considerations foreshadowed linguistic discussions. The issue of whether foreign loanwords could be found in the Qur'ān's Arabic vocabulary is one such example. Some medieval scholars did subscribe to the view that this was a plausible thesis which did not impinge upon the Arabic character of the text; conversely, others were concerned such an admission might be used in an insidious way to undermine the linguistic integrity of the Qur'ān's Arabic status. The contentiousness of the issue was lessened by the suggestion that lexical parallels between Arabic and other languages could be explained through the phenomenon of correspondence (*tawāfuq*), although issues such as this one did not arrest the inventiveness with which such subjects were tackled. Classical Islamic discourse on the origin of language was another theologically charged question. Orthodoxy initially espoused the belief that language was a divinely inspired phenomenon (*tawqīf*) with its primary elements being imparted to Adam by God, who taught him the names of all things created; Mūʿtazilite theologians elaborated an opposing theory which identified human agency (*iṣṭilāḥ*) in the genesis of the conventions of language. The philological concepts of metaphor, synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, and etymology were incorporated into the various deliberations. One even finds a number of scholars countenancing the view that there existed a natural affinity (onomatopoeia) between meanings and sounds. A prominent medieval philologist by the name of Ibn Fāris (d. 1004–5), who was an avid supporter of the thesis of *tawqīf*, claimed that Arabic grammar, orthography, and prosody were not invented by the Arabs, but rather rediscovered by them; they too had their origin in the divine imposition of language. Again, at stake were underlying theoretical principles about the nature of God. In general, however, such discourse reveals the subtle arcing of theological and linguistic concepts in the medieval Islamic tradition.

### Declension and the Qur'ān

One of the defining characteristics of Classical Arabic is that it possesses a fully operational system of declension (*i'rāb*): for instance, nominative, accusative, and genitive case endings, along with a range of grammatical moods and tenses, are indicated by specific vocalic values, which serve as tangible features of this intricate system of *i'rāb*. Some recent scholars have proposed the thesis that the Qur'ān's diction, as it was preserved in the Meccan dialect, did not originally exhibit the declensional features associated with the Arabs' esteemed poetic *koine*. The fact that the early written script was without *matres lectionis* (the notation of vowel markings) seemingly added weight to this theory. The inference is that grammarians and philologists of the developed traditions of linguistic thought, which were established in eighth-century

Iraq, superimposed such features onto the Qur'anic diction. These traditions primarily based their study of language on eastern Arabian sources whose dialectal conventions were deemed linguistically superior. The claim was made that the elevated literary form of the Arabs' literary *koine*, which employed the full operational declension, was mastered only by skilled poets and their informants, while the colloquial modes of speech, which dispensed with declension, were mostly in usage among the indigenous Arabs. It was argued that even the Bedouin Arabs had not retained declension in their everyday forms of communication. Interestingly, the linguistic variety which defines the many modern dialects of Arabic is outwardly traced to this state of affairs. The implication is that following the Islamic conquests, and the movements of population accompanying them, the Arab settlers simply preserved their characteristic dialectal distinctions, disseminating them in the places they settled; such dialects were naturally exposed to substrate influences.

Ultimately, reference is made to the fact that neither the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions nor the early Hijāzī Qur'anic manuscripts exhibited the syntactic inflection associated with the classical idiom. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that writing systems are essentially devised to facilitate the accurate recovery of a text without the assistance of an actual speaker (Daniels and Bright 1996: 3). The Arabic script had inherited the Aramaic–Nabataean abecedaries (*abjads*) which had not fully developed an advanced system for the notation of short vowels and indeed certain long vowels. The orthographical deficiencies inherent in the Aramaic–Nabataean model were replicated in the early Arabic script (Diem 1976: 56). Yet, these relate to issues of “recovery” and are hardly an indication that declension was not a distinctive feature of Qur'anic Arabic. Given the status of the Qur'ān as a devotional and recited text, great emphasis was placed on its oral preservation and transmission, a fact which appears to be overlooked in the arguments about the poetic *koine* and the use of declension in Arabic. The Qur'anic codices initially served as mnemonic devices. Their design was to perfect the precise physical recovery of the oral expression. Developments in this respect show the increasing importance of the written tradition. The declensional features of Arabic would have been principally preserved through the oral transmission of the text. Orthographical improvements in the shape of vowel markings, diacritical dots, and verse markers were later innovations refined by pioneers of Arabic linguistic thought.

The sharp distinction between the elevated form of Classical Arabic, which was the esteemed literary idiom, and the colloquial vernaculars in common usage among the early Arabs has been hypothetically defined as a form of diglossia; moreover, it has led to the contention that this state of affairs permeated certain forms of literary prose. Hypocorrections and hypercorrections (the former relate to partial grammatical corrections found in early manuscripts, while the latter defines the affected grammatical emendation of texts) in early Islamic papyri and materials from later periods are highlighted to demonstrate this point. It has led to the designation of a type of literary idiom referred to as Middle Arabic and a number of further complex sub-divisions of Classical Arabic. One scholar has argued that this tells us little about the actual state of the vernacular: accordingly, Middle Arabic texts may reflect only the levels of proficiency of the individuals who transcribed these texts (Versteegh 1997: 114). Although Middle Arabic constitutes deviations from the norms of standard grammar, the Classical Arabic idiom always served as the definitive model and yardstick of such

derived styles and the intended literary paradigm of aspiring authors. Besides, Classical Arabic was the unquestionable object of attention and target language as far as the Arabic grammarians were concerned.

### Development of the script after the rise of Islam

The issue of whether the Arabic script evolved from either a Nabataean or Syriac archetype has been the subject of much debate among paleographers. There is a tendency to accept that while the cursive used by the Nabataeans served as the principal model for the Arabic script, Syriac influences also had an impact upon the script's development. It should be noted that the Nabataean and Syriac scripts both had an Aramaic derivation. Arabic required a total of 28 consonants which it derived from the 15 available graphemes (characters). In a number of instances, the same grapheme was used to represent dissimilar phonemic values. Diacritical dots and markings were eventually devised to distinguish these graphemes, allowing the script to accommodate the phonemic range of the Arabic language. There existed precedents regarding the use of diacritical dots: they were actually used in the Nabataean cursive script for the purpose of differentiating certain characters; furthermore, Syriac employed a strategically placed dot to distinguish the homograph used to denote the characters *d* and *r*. One of the earliest Islamic papyri which display diacritical markings is dated to the year 642, although the use of diacritical markings in the Arabic script appears to have a pre-Islamic provenance. The addition of diacritics is technically called *i'jām*, which, through a quaint etymological rule, literally connotes making clear. The official (*textus receptus*) of the Qur'ān, which was compiled under the aegis of the third caliph 'Uthmān (r. 644–56), is said to have been deliberately stripped of diacritical dots to accommodate occasional consonantal variants in the recitation of the text. Most paleographers accept that the use of diacritical markings in the early Hijāzī scripts was somewhat irregular. This is true of their incidence in papyri, inscriptions, and coins. The argument is that they originally appeared in the form of “dashes” in older Qur'anic manuscripts; and initially there was even religious opposition to their usage. However, arguments were advanced for their utility, and diacritical dots gradually permeated manuscripts and folios of the Qur'ān, becoming a ubiquitous feature in later codices. In the same way that the numbering of individual verses was a later introduction based on conventions preserved through oral transmission among reciters of the Qur'ān. A system of vowel notation pioneered by the early Arabic grammarians also made use of dots.

Arabic models of vowel notation were conceived for the intention of aiding the recitation of the sacred text. Their inception is linked with the Basran Abū 'l-Aswad al-Du'alī (d. 688), who is hailed as the architect of Arabic grammar. The suggestion is that there was awareness among those pioneers of Arabic, and indeed Hebrew orthography, of the developments relating to vowel notation in Syriac. It had developed three unique scripts with the earliest of these being the Estrangelo cursive. One such text in this script, which is dated to 411 CE, reveals the use of diacritical and vowel markings in the form of strategically placed dots (Healey 1990: 245). Eastern and western models of vowel notation in Syriac were in use. The former was formulated in the fourth and fifth centuries CE; while the latter system is associated with Jacob of Edessa (d. 708). In the Basran scheme, a single red dot was placed above,

below, and in front of a given consonant to indicate the short vowels of *fatḥa*, *kasra*, and *ḍamma* correspondingly. Doubled red dots were used for instances of *tanwīn* (nunation), while blue, yellow, and green dots were employed to indicate pauses, glottal stops, and a range of phonological traits. The process of vowel marking was formerly referred to as *naqṭ* (literally adding dots), although later on the term *tashkīl* was applied. Reference is also made to the fact that the Meccans previously adhered to an ancient system of dot placement which was not in concord with the Basran scheme: a dot placed above a consonant was used to represent the short vowel of *ḍamma*, while a dot situated in front of, or adjacent, to a consonant denoted the *fatḥa*. The system was eventually discarded for the Basran model. Sets of fine strokes, dots, and circles were used to mark off separate verses of the Qurʾān with further markers being devised to indicate batches of five and ten Qurʾānic verses. Gradually, these were improved through the use of decorated bands and rosettes. A Basran individual renowned for his creative brilliance in the field of grammar, lexicography, and prosody, Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 791–2), eventually devised a format which allowed the use of dots to be replaced. His scheme of supra-linear and sub-linear notation was based on graphic proto-types of the three Arabic vowels: *alif*, *wāw*, and *yā*. They were used to represent the vocalic values of *fatḥa*, *ḍamma*, and *kasra*. Khalīl proposed further orthographical improvements to denote geminated consonants and other phonological properties.

Classical Arabic biographies do speak of the pre-Islamic Meccans being taught the art of writing by the people of Anbār, which is situated close to Ḥīra in Iraq, where Syriac was formally dominant. It was said that the script was brought back to Mecca by itinerant merchants and that it influenced indigenous scripts of the Ḥijāz. Nevertheless, this view does tend to deflect attention from the fact that Arabic scripts were already in use in the Ḥijāz and that, steadily, a range of individual techniques and styles had developed in the conventions of writing. Paleographic and epigraphic evidence appears to support this judgment. The term Kufic was used to designate the calligraphic style of early Qurʾānic codices, although its links with the city of Kūfa, which was established in the year 639, remain vague. However, it is the case that such was the predominance of this Iraqi script that most early specimens of Qurʾānic manuscripts were actually designated as being Kufic. This tended to overshadow the variety of styles which had existed and led to the proposal of an alternative system of classifying early Arabic scripts (Déroche 1992: 16), particularly as far as Qurʾānic codices were concerned. Additionally, the so-called Kufic script was used for monumental purposes and for non-Qurʾānic transcription. Paper was introduced into the Islamic world around 733 and this had a dramatic impact upon the further development of the script. The so-called *naskh* style which was employed for copying was given meticulous definition first by Ibn Muqla (d. 940) and then by Ibn al-Bawwāb (d. 1022). The prohibition of representational art in the Islamic tradition meant that calligraphy became an important medium for artistic expression furthering the aesthetic development of the script.

The Arabic script was adopted in those parts of the world where Muslim rule and influence was in the ascendancy. The basic model of the Arabic script was used for the transcription of the Iranian languages of Persian, Kurdish, and Pashto; it served the Indic languages of Urdu, Sindhi, and Kashmiri; and the Berber languages of North Africa. Diacritical markings were devised to enable the phonemic range of these various

languages to be accommodated. The Malay languages of Southeast Asia had originally adopted the Arabic script, but it was replaced by the Latin script. African languages such as Swahili, Hausa, and Somali had until recently all employed Arabic scripts, a legacy of the close relationship between language and faith. The Ottoman Empire, whose rule stretched over six centuries, used the script for the intricate language of Ottoman Turkish until its use was banned in the 1920s with the abolishment of the caliphate. A new Latin-based script was developed. The Arabic script was even used by the Balto-Slavic languages of Polish and Ukrainian. Despite being relinquished in a number of these Muslim countries, the script of Arabic retains its devotional importance as it continues to be taught for the recitation of Islam's sacred scripture, the Qur'ān.

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