

ARABIC LITERATURE  
TO THE END OF  
THE UMAYYAD PERIOD

EDITED BY  
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## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND TOPICS

#### THE EVOLUTION OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

In the first half of the first millennium A.D., the landmass bounded by the fringes of the Anatolian highlands, the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, the coasts of the Arabian Peninsula, and the western escarpment of the Iranian plateau, was the home of a family of languages now commonly termed Semitic. Intruding into the area were Greek-speaking populations within the boundaries of the Roman-Byzantine empire, and Middle Persian within those of the Sasanian empire; outside it, the Aksumite kingdom of Ethiopia also used a Semitic language. While the various members of this language-family are differentiated from each other in detail as sharply as are European languages such as French and Spanish, they exhibit general similarities which set them off, as a group, from languages such as Persian, which belongs to the Indo-European language-family.

By the early centuries A.D., two of the most important members of the Semitic language-family had virtually disappeared from the scene: Akkadian, the ancient language of Mesopotamia, was extinct; and Hebrew remained only as a learned and liturgical language no longer in everyday use. But two other important languages still dominated the area culturally. In the north, there was a cluster of Aramaic dialects, two of which have special significance, namely Syriac (used by the Christian populations of Syria and Mesopotamia) and Nabataean (used by pagan populations centred on the great caravan city of Petra). In the south, present-day Yemen was the home of an antique culture, of which the dominant representative was the kingdom of Saba (Sheba). The Sabaic language of pre-Christian times shows sufficient distinctive characteristics to warrant us in treating it as an independent language within the Semitic family. But in Christian times it shows an increasing degree of approximation in vocabulary to the language which was later to be called Arabic, while apparently retaining its distinctive morphology and syntax.

There must also have been present even then a group of languages constituting the forerunners of what is now called Modern South Arabian, spoken in the middle of the south coast of the Arabian Peninsula, to the

east of Yemen. Since these languages have never been the bearers of a literate culture, ancient testimony to their character is lacking. They do show, nevertheless, differences from Arabic, in phonology, morphology and syntax, comparable with the differences between Sabaic and Arabic; and although they have many words which are cognate with, or direct borrowings from, Arabic, large areas of their vocabulary are distinctive.

Between the northern and southern areas of civilization, the central and northern parts of the Arabian Peninsula are largely desert, populated mainly by nomads or semi-nomads, with occasional oases culturally similar to the nomadic areas. Here, there was a medley of dialects, closely related to each other, and it was from these that Arabic as we know it eventually sprang. Yet there are a number of factors severely inhibiting our attempts at assessing the overall linguistic picture.

Firstly, among the languages which have been mentioned above as dominant in the first half of the first millennium A.D., only Syriac and the Jewish variety of Aramaic have a "literature" in the strict sense. The greatest contrast is with the nomad bedouin dialects: our first-hand records of these are practically entirely graffiti – casual scribblings incorporating proper names and a few words conveying the simplest of messages (e.g. of the "A loves B" type). Even in the more civilized ambience of Nabataean and Sabaic, the material is predominantly archival in character: funerary inscriptions, building records, dedications of votive objects and so on. History, in the sense of consciously articulated and connected records (such as we have in the Assyrian annals and in the historical books of the Old Testament) is lacking, though there are occasional allusions to historical events, phrased in the baldest of language. The only exception to this is a handful of Sabaic inscriptions in which military operations are described with a certain vividness of detail showing some approach to literary skill. But of poetry, mythology and other connected writing we have nothing. It can be taken as certain that these peoples had a literature of that kind, but that it was transmitted solely by oral means.

Secondly, the Semitic scripts in which the inscriptions are drafted tend to record only consonants, with no (or only the most rudimentary) notation for vowels. Not only does this impose great limitations on linguistic analysis, it also makes even the understanding of the semantic content of the inscriptions often extremely speculative.

The script of the Nabataean inscriptions is a variety of Aramaic script; that of the South Arabian inscriptions, on the other hand, is an entirely distinctive alphabet having affinities with Ethiopic script (as nowadays used for the national language of Ethiopia, Amharic). In pre-Islamic times, the central Arabian nomads used an alphabet of the South Arabian type,



and not of the northern type. In this connection, there is one terminological pitfall which deserves mention. Until not so long ago, it used to be thought that the nomadic bedouin were entirely alphabetic. Only around the beginning of the present century were two clusters of inscriptions discovered, disproving this. One is a highly homogeneous cluster around the volcanic region of the Syrian desert called the *Ṣafā*, and these have on geographical grounds been denominated Safaitic. The other is in the northern Hijaz, in an area traditionally the home of the ancient tribe of *Thamūd* (in the classical authors *Thamudeni*); these have been designated *Thamudic*. Later discoveries have shown that similar inscriptions were widely distributed over the Peninsula; these reveal more than one dialect, and some variety of cultural background. Yet they have continued to be called *Thamudic*, though this must now be considered to be, strictly speaking, a misnomer, for it is clear that they cannot all emanate from the one tribe of *Thamūd*. The scripts they use are simply characteristic of the populations of central Arabia (nomad, semi-nomad and oasis dwellers), and have been encountered even within the South Arabian area, probably due to the presence of an admixture of bedouin among the sedentaries who were the bearers of the typical South Arabian civilization (a similar mingling of population elements is observable in that area down to the present day).

The Safaitic and the so-called *Thamudic* inscriptions are clearly not "Arabic", any more than Anglo-Saxon could be called English; for one thing, their definite article is *ha(n)*-. Yet we do have a tiny group of inscriptions which show a decidedly Arabic character, including the use of the typical Arabic definite article *al*-. Four of these are datable to the sixth century A.D., but before that time there is only one which can be securely dated: this is the funerary inscription of an individual who is styled "king of all the Arabs" (Arabs in the early period meant exclusively bedouin), found at *Nemara* in the Syrian desert and dated A.D. 328. At least one text of a similar linguistic character, from *al-Fāw* near *Sulayyil* in southern *Najd*, is perhaps datable slightly earlier than that, and is in South Arabian script. But the *Nemara* inscription, and the sixth-century ones, are not in any type of southern alphabet, but in a script of *Nabataean* (i.e. North Semitic) type. These thus foreshadow the shift whereby Arabic script (itself evolved from one of the *Nabataean-Nemara* type) was ultimately to sweep the use of the southern alphabet right out of the Peninsula and leave it confined to the Horn of Africa.

All this, meagre as it is, sums up our written evidence prior to the Islamic revelation. Although the *Qur'ān* itself was committed to writing during the Prophet's lifetime, and although from then on we have a thin trickle

of non-inscriptional documents on papyrus or paper (letters, contracts and so on), the main tradition still remained for a century and a half firmly oral in character. Early poetry (attributed to the beginning of the sixth century A.D.), the prose accounts of pre-Islamic tribal history, even the accounts of the Prophet's own life and sayings – everything of this nature was transmitted orally, with all that this implies in possibilities of verbal variation, and did not receive the permanent stabilization of being recorded in writing as a regular thing until the eighth century; a few scanty remains of “literary” papyri are perhaps attributable to the end of the seventh, but hardly earlier than that.

This change of attitude towards the use of writing for purposes other than those of day-to-day needs (like letters and contracts) can be associated with the ‘Abbasid political revolution of A.D. 750, which transferred power from Arab leaders, governing their actions by bedouin traditions, to a new urbanized élite in which non-Arabs, inheritors of the cultural traditions of Byzantium and of Sasanian Persia, played a vital role.

From this shift flowed three consequences of the utmost importance. Firstly, it is only from this time that Arabic can be said properly to possess a *written* literature apart from the Qur’ān. Secondly, the language itself, as used in the mouths of a population which, though Arabic-speaking, was to a considerable extent non-Arab by race, underwent significant changes. Thirdly – and in consequence of those changes – scholars viewed it as their task not only to record in permanent form the oral tradition as they had received it, but also to analyse and codify the language of that tradition; and this gave rise to the science of Arabic grammar (in the widest sense).

At its inception, Arabic grammar was not normative and prescriptive, but purely descriptive. Hence, fortunately, the grammarians have preserved for us a mass of data which demonstrate that the earliest Arabic was not a standardized and unified language, but had many dialectal variations. To the modern European mind, it is a strange phenomenon that the Qur’ān itself, though regarded by Muslims as the authentic Word of God in the most literal sense, was read in a variety of ways involving not merely dialectal pronunciations but also morphological and even occasionally vocabulary variation. As time went on, there was a strong tendency towards reducing this linguistic disparity, first by restricting the accepted modes of reading to seven “canonical” varieties and rejecting others as “non-canonical”, and finally by evolving a single *textus receptus* which is today standard.

The Qur’ān, however, is a book of relatively small bulk, and there are large areas of speech which simply do not happen to occur there, yet are of importance, as they constitute the linguistic matrix within which the

Quranic text operates and has to be understood. To gain such an understanding, the grammarians turned to the orally inherited traditions of the ancient poetry, and to the speech of the bedouin with whom they could come into contact. Although their original intentions had been descriptive, the fact that the linguistic corpus they were describing was in the main a closed body of material – the Qur’ān and the early poetry – contained in itself the seeds of a normative and prescriptive attitude, which soon became the order of the day. All data which conflicted with the description evolved on that basis were relegated to the status of sub-standard dialectal varieties.

The strength of this normative attitude has prevented the Arab grammarians from accepting the concept of linguistic evolution and development. The grammatical principles worked out by the eighth-century grammarians are taken to be the only “correct” ones, and form the basis of language teaching in schools throughout the Arabic-speaking world at the present day. This has resulted in certain oddities; for the language at the time when it was thus arrested was in certain respects in a transitional phase, which has become frozen at the point where it had reached in the seventh century. For example, the Quranic language has a well-developed system of case-inflection of nouns; and there is one demonstrative form which was also fully case-inflected in some of the ancient dialects, but which in the Quranic language has lost its case-inflections in the singular and plural (*alladhī*, *alladhīna*) while retaining them in the dual.

The selection of the poetic corpus as a linguistic criterion is due to the fact that this displays the most “elevated” *niveau de discours* available, and it is clear that in matters of morphology, syntax and lexicon the Qur’ān is in the same elevated diction. But in matters of phonology, the grammarians faced a difficult problem. The total assemblage of dialectal features which they have recorded shows a certain dichotomy between eastern dialects and those of the west, principally the Hijaz. Now the poetic material, in the form in which we have it recorded, is basically eastern in character; for the centre of early Arabic grammatical activity was in Lower Mesopotamia, and the bedouin with whom the grammarians had contact were easterners. Yet the Qur’ān was revealed in the Hijaz, and was first written down in an orthography reflecting western pronunciation. To overcome this difficulty, the grammarians did not attempt to alter the Quranic orthography as it was by then accepted, but instead added reading marks directing an eastern pronunciation. This feature, of a basically Hijazi orthography modified in this fashion, has resulted in oddities of conventional spelling which persist in Arabic to the present day.

The relationship between the elevated style of the Qur’ān and of the

poetic corpus, and the language of everyday life in early times, is still a much disputed question. That the former was understood throughout the Peninsula seems indisputable in broad terms, though particular words might be – and in fact were, as the traditions show – obscure to some of the auditors. But was it at any time or in any place congruous in morphology and syntax with the actual language of everyday life? Medieval Muslims held that it was in fact the language of the Prophet's tribe, Quraysh, and that this in itself was an eclectic synthesis of "all that was best" in the various tribal dialects. Some European scholars (notably K. Vollers) have held on the contrary that it never was a language of everyday use, but a *koine* used solely for the purposes of elevated diction and similar in status in this respect to Homeric Greek. But whatever the truth of this, we have here the first hint of a problem of diglossia that has been persistent throughout the history of Arabic – the dichotomy between elevated discourse and everyday language; for the natural evolution of the latter could not be restrained by the grammarians, whose efforts at standardization affected only literature and elevated discourse generally. Such a differentiation of course exists in every language with a literary tradition, but it is far wider in present-day Arabic than is usual in most other languages, and has caused acute anxiety to writers and educationalists.

The dialects of the sixth and early seventh century A.D. were tribal dialects of the Arabian Peninsula. But it has proved difficult to make any satisfactory correlation between these and the dialectal varieties of spoken Arabic of the more important cultural centres today. The inference commonly accepted is that with the shift from nomadism to urbanization in the mid-eighth century, the early tribal dialects fused into an urban *koine* in the principal centres of urbanization; and that each of these thereafter followed its own linguistic evolution, no doubt influenced to some extent by the former language of the area. One interesting and easily apprehended example of this is found in the Egyptian vernacular. The transformation of a statement including an ordinary pronoun into a question using an interrogative pronoun involves in most Arabic, literary and vernacular alike, a change in word order to bring the interrogative pronoun to the beginning of the sentence ("you think it" → "what do you think?"); but in the Egyptian vernacular there is no change of word order, for the interrogative pronoun retains the place in the sentence which was occupied by the non-interrogative pronoun ("you think what?"). This is a feature which it shares with the Coptic linguistic substratum.

It is probably impossible now to determine the pace of evolution of the spoken language through the centuries. For the fact that, from the later

eighth century on, the previously exclusively oral literary tradition was increasingly transformed into a written one, means that our records tend to reflect an elevated diction (*fushḥā*) and not the colloquial one (*‘āmmah*). This, however, is perhaps an over-simplification; for between those two there was probably a third variety, namely the conversational usage of the educated classes. It is likely, in my view, that some of the works of the third/ninth-century essayist Jāḥiẓ reflect the latter; and to judge from this, its differences from the highest-style *fushḥā* were still relatively minor. But when we move on to the sixth/twelfth century, we find that the memoirs of Usāmah ibn Munqidh, Syrian warrior and man of letters of the crusading period, which evidently reflect the language he actually spoke, are much more sharply differentiated linguistically from the sort of prose being written in the same period by more “literary” authors.

At the same time, one must not underrate the changes which took place in the course of the second/eighth century. The shift from a bedouin to an urbanized environment had an immense effect on the lexicon. On one hand, a huge bedouin vocabulary covering in minute detail the features of desert life became strange and unusual for the urbanized Arabic speakers. On the other hand, an equally large new vocabulary was demanded by the material and intellectual outlook of the city-dwellers. This need was met in part by the adoption of Iranian loanwords, mainly in the field of material culture and many of them consequently discarded when that material culture gave way to a more modern one. In the intellectual field recourse was had to Greek, and these loanwords have largely held their ground. In part, however, the need for a new vocabulary was met by developing the inherent resources of the archaic language and its potentialities for creating new formations out of its own basic materials. This procedure has also to a considerable extent been followed in more modern times in creating a modern vocabulary. The general trend in Arabic, both in the second/eighth-century intellectual revolution and in the modern one, has been similar to that of German, where the native coinage “Sauerstoff” has been preferred to the loanword “oxygen”.

Even more striking than the lexical developments was the evolution in the realm of syntax. The archaic language was intellectually unsophisticated, using parataxis extensively and with relatively little resort to hypotaxis. The ‘Abbasid writers rapidly evolved a new style using elaborate and involved paragraph structure, with abundant hypotaxis and precise indications of the logical links between the parts of the paragraph. This was achieved not so much by developing new syntactic tools as by giving a greater degree of functional precision to tools which had previously been imprecise and ambivalent.

In morphology, the 'Abbasid elevated style shows virtually no changes from the system elaborated by the grammarians. Certainly, the metrical and rhyming features of 'Abbasid verse show that the archaic morphological system was there retained to the full. But there are indications that outside of verse there was a trend towards discarding the case-inflections. We cannot tell how far this was carried, because Arabic script does not normally note short vowels, which constitute the bulk of the case-ending differentiae. But it is plausible to suppose that there arrived quite early in the 'Abbasid period the situation that still obtains at the present day: the case-endings are not used in ordinary conversation, even at the educated level, but are regarded as indispensable for very formal diction. It must, indeed, be remarked that certain European scholars have held that this was the position even in pre-Islamic times.

The 'Abbasid writers of the second/eighth–sixth/twelfth century, with their expanded and refined vocabulary and the syntactic tools they had evolved for the precise expression of logical relationships, created a literature of the utmost brilliance and subtlety, making this a golden age of Arabic. Thereafter, the literary language ossified. With a few shining exceptions, the literature down to the nineteenth century is linguistically static. Diglossia had set in in full strength, and literary writing was artificial to approximately the same extent as was the use of Latin in mediaeval Western Europe, when the modern European vernaculars such as French, Spanish and Italian had already taken shape.

In the latter half of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, there was a literary revival (*nahḍah*) movement, which was a true “renaissance” in that the prime objective of its proponents was to recapture the freshness and vigour of the golden age writers. Since there was no Arabic printing in the Arabic-speaking world until the early thirteenth/nineteenth century, those writers had become almost unknown, except to a tiny minority of scholars to whom the rare manuscripts were available. Much of the labour of the protagonists of the *nahḍah* was directed to printing and publishing reliable texts of the golden age writers, and compiling dictionaries of “correct” usage.

It is in the last half-century that truly “modern” Arabic has appeared. Here, two trends can be observed, not indeed in isolation from each other, but rather present in a greater or lesser degree in all writing. On one hand, there is a continuation and development of the *nahḍah* principles, aimed at moulding the golden age language to modern uses. The artificiality and sterility of the long period of literary decline have been discarded, but the modes of thought and expression remain firmly Arab in character and within the golden age tradition. The trend is more perceptible in essayists and historians, and generally in writing expressive of abstract thought.

On the other hand, scientific and imaginative writing has been heavily influenced by European models. Calques on the usage of French and English are encountered both in the field of lexicon and in that of tournure. One of the most noticeable things about the modern vocabulary is the extent to which pure Arabic words have had their field of reference either narrowed or expanded in congruence with European semantic fields. In the former case, a word which earlier had a broad and general application has been restricted to some phenomenon specific to modern culture; thus *wāridāt*, which to a golden age reader would have conveyed only the very general concept of “things coming in”, is now the specific commercial technicality for “imports”, i.e. one highly special kind of “things coming in”. In the second case, there has been a tendency, where one sense of an Arabic word is the equivalent of one sense of a European word, to extend the application of the Arabic word to all other senses of the European word. An example of this is *tābi*: in traditional Arabic this meant a “seal-impression”, which was also the meaning of English “stamp” until 1839; the invention of the adhesive postage stamp in that year led to the extension of the applicability of “stamp” to that phenomenon also, and the Arabic word has followed suit.

European influence in the field of tournure is more elusive and less easy to define. One simple example can, however, be quoted. Modern English has adopted a practice (which must from the point of view of linguistic logic be rated as deplorable) of replacing a verb by a noun accompanied by a cliché verb virtually meaningless in itself and serving only to verbalize the noun; instead of saying simply that one “agrees”, “decides”, and so on; the tendency now is to say that one “comes to an agreement”, “takes a decision”. This regrettably fluffy type of phraseology would have been abhorrent to a golden age writer, but is gradually seeping into modern Arabic.

One can hardly overestimate the influence that the radio has had on the Arabic language. The wide differences between the regional vernaculars make it essential for any broadcast which is aimed at the whole Arabic-speaking world to be in standard language. Consequently all classes have become accustomed to hear and comprehend this, even though many hearers are still incapable of using it themselves. While the spread of education is gradually eroding this incapacity, there is a long way to go, and diglossia will remain a problem for many years to come. English dialects (Yorkshire, Glasgow and so on) retain their distinctive phonology and lexicon, but hardly differ at all from standard English in morphology and syntax. This is not the case with the Arabic vernaculars vis-à-vis the standard language, and the problems are correspondingly more acute.

In a very rough and ready way, one might say that modern literary

Arabic uses the morphology of the Qur'ān and ancient poetry, the syntax of the 'Abbasid golden age, and the lexicon of that age plus very substantial modern additions; it is less differentiated from 'Abbasid language than modern English is from Chaucer's.

There have been experiments in writing in the vernacular, but these have not been greatly successful, and there has always been the fear that they would interfere with the emergence of a literature appealing equally to all parts of the Arab world. Only in drama, which is in any case not designed to be read, has there been some success; but stage drama has itself not been completely accepted within Arab culture and continues to be regarded by many as a foreign import.

#### THE ARABIC SCRIPT

At the beginning of the first millennium B.C., the Phoenicians were using an alphabetic script comprising twenty-two symbols, all of which were consonants; vowels were not represented and had to be inferred by the reader. A century or two later, some limited attempts appeared, intended to afford the reader a minimal aid in doing so by the use of two or three of the consonantal symbols as indications of vowels. But this was done only sporadically, not fully consistently; and these letters remained ambiguous, since they still had to be read as consonants in some contexts. It was reserved for the Greeks, when they adopted the Phoenician alphabet around 600 B.C., to take the radical step of assigning exclusively vocalic values to some of the Phoenician letters denoting consonantal sounds which did not exist in Greek. Thereby they created an alphabet divided into two groups, one exclusively consonants and one exclusively vowels. This was never imitated in Semitic scripts, and when eventually some notation for vowels was evolved, it was conveyed by other means than the alphabetic symbols.

Side by side with the north-west Semitic alphabet, of which Phoenician is a characteristic example, there had evolved in the more southern parts of the Semitic-speaking areas alphabets of up to twenty-eight or twenty-nine symbols, since these areas had a larger repertory of consonant phonemes than Phoenician. These southern alphabets derive from the same stock as the Phoenician one, and many of the symbols are closely similar in both varieties of alphabet; apart from the extra letters, only a few have markedly distinctive southern forms. The fourth-century A.D. Nemara inscription (p. 3) is in a northern type of script closely similar to Nabataean. But the southern scripts were once widely spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula, and some of the earliest examples even occur on the fringes of



the northern area. But, as mentioned above (p. 3), the cultural boundary gradually shifted southwards and westwards; and in the time of the Prophet, Mecca itself was using a script of the northern type.

Already several centuries previously, Nabataean, Palmyrene and Syriac had developed a "ligatured" script in which, instead of each letter being written separately, a majority of the letters (but with six exceptions) were joined on to the succeeding letter in the same word. One result of this was that many of the letter forms developed slightly differing shapes according to their position at the beginning, middle or end of the word. In addition, a tendency began to show itself for some letter forms to lose their individuality in such a way that a single letter form can be read with two different sounds – sounds which had earlier been noted by two distinct letter forms. In Syriac, this happened with only two letters, *d* and *r*; and the device was adopted of differentiating these by the addition of a dot above or below the letter. In Nemara, there are a great many more of these ambiguities, but no attempt to resolve them by the use of diacritic dots. In addition, the Nemara inscription has not expanded the north-west Semitic alphabetic repertory by adding any extra letters; hence in several cases one letter has to do duty for two Arabic sounds.

Arabic script shows certain affinities with Syriac on one hand and with Nemara on the other; but its precise genesis is uncertain, since barely two or three pre-Islamic specimens survive. Its ligaturing system resembles both Syriac and Nemara, particularly in that the same six letters resist ligaturing to a following letter in all three scripts. As in Nemara, there is a large number of ambiguous letter forms, and as in Syriac diacritic dots seem occasionally to have been used for differentiating these; yet the use of diacritic dots is to start with exceedingly rare, and has in fact never become absolutely regular practice (as it has in Syriac). Moreover, the letters which in Arabic need diacritics form a list different both from the Syriac and the Nemara lists: e.g. *r* and *z*, both in Syriac and Nemara, are still differentiated in basic form, but in Arabic need a diacritic dot to distinguish *z*; on the other hand, *r* and *d* are undifferentiated in Nemara but differentiated in Arabic. In some cases in Arabic the differentiation is not simply by presence or absence of a dot, but between varieties in the number and placing of dots: initial and medial *b*, *t*, *th*, *n*, *y* all have dots differing in number and placing, and in word-end position only *n* and *y* are distinctive without the aid of dots.

The use of diacritic dots eventually allowed the expansion of the Arabic alphabet to a complement of twenty-eight letters, as required by the phonemic system of the language. Yet the use of diacritics has never become universal in practice. In the first two centuries of Islam they were