

Historical Inscriptions of the Arabic Script in the Regions of al-Hira, the Nabataeans, and Their Surroundings

Suha Fadhil Abbas, Prof. Shakir Mahmoud Ismael

College of Education for Humanities, University of Diyala, Iraq

Hum22hsh18@uodiyala.edu.iq

Abstract

Inscriptions are among the most prominent features of the kingdoms of al-Hira and the Nabataeans. Their importance stems from being among the foremost sources for Arab history, as they contain historical texts that show these two kingdoms employed the Arabic script in its earliest formative stage. They thus represent a symbol of the manifestations of Arab human civilization and a historical record of those ancient civilizations and their cultures. From this arises the importance of the present research in studying and discussing these inscriptions.

Keywords: historical texts.

Introduction

The kingdoms of al-Hira and the Nabataeans witnessed notable prosperity in their political and civilizational history, particularly evident in the number of ancient texts and writings that constitute the most prominent civilizational face of the pre-Islamic Arabs. It is for this reason that we chose the title “Historical Texts of the Arabic Script in the Regions of al-Hira, the Nabataeans, and Their Surroundings,” in order to elucidate those texts that attest to the earliest beginnings of the use of the Arabic script.

The research is composed of two sections. The first deals with the Nabataean texts, while the second discusses what Orientalists and later scholars discovered of inscriptions and historical texts belonging to these two kingdoms. It is preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. The nature of the research necessitated recourse to a number of sources and references; success comes from God alone.

The Nabataean Texts

A student of the ancient texts found across the various regions of the Arab lands will find that the Nabataean texts are more numerous than the Hiran texts (those found in the kingdom of al-Hira). This stems from the geographical nature of the two regions: the terrain of the al-Hira region consists of clayey soil within an alluvial plain where stone is not widely available, whereas the Nabataean region is characterized by the presence of hard stone — hence the large number of stone inscriptions and texts found there.

Among the most important Nabataean texts are the following:

The Text of Khirbat al-Raqiq: The oldest text written in cursive Nabataean script, found near Beersheba. It may have been moved from its original location and used as a paving stone; it contains an incantation text whose approximate form dates to around 100 BCE¹, and it is considered the earliest known example of rounded Nabataean texts.²

¹Gruendler, Beatrice: *A History of Arabic Scripts and Writing from the Nabataeans to the Beginnings of Islam*, trans. Sultan al-Ma'ani and Firdaws al-'Ajlouni (Jordan: Bayt al-Anbat, 2004), p. 29.

²'Ajlouni, Ahmad: *The Civilization of the Nabataeans through Their Inscriptions* (Jordan: Bayt al-Anbat for Authorship and Publishing, 2003), p. 111.

The Text of Tell al-Shuqafiya: A text that appeared among the remains of a temple, discovered around 1914 CE at Tell al-Shuqafiya (near Wadi Tumaylat in Lower Egypt) — that is, during the reign of Ptolemy VIII³, whose throne was under the regency of Cleopatra, as mentioned earlier. The form of the script resembles that of the Rabbel inscription of 66 BCE, though it differs from it slightly and is closer to that of the Aslah text; accordingly, this inscription may be placed at an intermediate stage between the two. Its reading was completed by Jano, following the earlier work of Strangel.⁴

The Text of Kamkam: A text belonging to an early phase (16–17 CE), an undated inscription with a script that is more clearly rounded than the other ordinary stone texts mentioned above. The script in this inscription stands midway between the rounded form and the shapes found on funerary monuments, which are usually carved in relief⁵. The Kamkam inscription is named after a woman called Kamkam and is carved in stone; it is the first inscription to display a clear specimen of the Nabataean script.⁶

The Text of al-Raqash: A bilingual Thamudic–Nabataean funerary text belonging to al-Raqash bint 'Abd Manat⁷, commissioned by her son Ka'b ibn Haritha⁸ in the year 162 according to the Bosra era (268 CE), placed between two Nabataean tombs at al-'Ula. Blau described the text as representing a border dialect, while Diem considered its language a dialect shared between Nabataean and Hijazi.⁹

In this text the letters alif and ha still retain their original forms, but the letters waw, ha', ba', and jim have become closer to their Arabic counterparts.¹⁰

The Text of Aslah: This text was found at Petra on a triple base in a sacred place known as Bab al-Siq. It is dated to the first year of the reign of Obodas I at Petra (90–85 BCE), as mentioned earlier. The form of the script in the Petra texts is illustrated through this dedicatory inscription by a person named Aslah, dedicated to Dushara.¹¹

The Text of Jabal Ram (Wadi Ram): “Jabal Ram” is located about 25 kilometers east of Aqaba. The site under discussion lies at Wadi Ram, close to which is 'Ayn Ma' (a spring).¹²

Wadi Ram is one of the largest, most beautiful, and grandest of the Nabataean valleys, surrounded by mountains and rocky heights. Human intervention there appears limited compared with Petra, and the Nabataeans settled in scattered locations within it. This valley served as an open route for the passage of trade caravans, and a

³Ptolemy VIII: known as “Sawatira,” ruled sixteen years after Ptolemy VII, known as “Arwa Khaytus,” whose reign lasted twenty-nine years. Ibn al-Wardi, 'Umar ibn al-Muzaffar ibn 'Umar ibn Muhammad ibn Abi al-Fawaris (d. 749 AH): *Tarikh Ibn al-Wardi*, 1st ed. (Lebanon: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1996), vol. 1, p. 50.

⁴Gruendler: *A History of Arabic Scripts...*, p. 30; 'Ajlouni: *The Civilization of the Nabataeans...*, p. 111.

⁵'Ajlouni: *The Civilization of the Nabataeans...*, p. 114.

⁶Gruendler: *A History of Arabic Scripts...*, p. 30.

⁷Al-Raqash bint 'Abd Manat: daughter of al-Ashamm ibn Munabbih ibn Asad ibn 'Abd Manat ibn 'A'idh Allah ibn Sa'd al-'Ashira, of Madhhij; her mother was Kabsha bint al-Rafiqi ibn Malik ibn al-Hammas ibn Rabi'a ibn Ka'b ibn al-Harith ibn Ka'b. Ibn Sa'd, Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn Sa'd ibn Muni' (d. 230 AH): *al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, ed. Muhammad 'Abd al-Qadir 'Ata, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990), vol. 1, p. 53.

⁸Ka'b ibn Haritha: ibn Ghanm ibn al-Salm ibn Imru' al-Qays ibn Malik ibn al-Aws al-Ansari. Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, Abu 'Umar Yusuf ibn 'Abdallah ibn Muhammad (d. 463 AH): *al-Ishti'ab fi Ma'rifat al-Ashab*, ed. 'Ali Muhammad al-Bajawi, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1992), vol. 2, p. 588.

⁹Gruendler: *A History of Arabic Scripts...*, p. 30.

¹⁰'Ajlouni: *The Civilization of the Nabataeans...*, p. 115.

¹¹Gruendler: *A History of Arabic Scripts...*, p. 29; 'Ajlouni: *The Civilization of the Nabataeans...*, p. 116.

¹²'Ali, Jawad: *al-Mufasssal fi Tarikh al-'Arab qabl al-Islam* [The Detailed History of the Arabs before Islam], 4th ed. (n.p.: Dar al-Saqi, 2001), vol. 1, p. 306.

chain of Nabataean fortresses protected these caravans; remains of these still survive at Khirbat al-Khalidi¹³ and Khirbat Kathara^{14, 15}

The text was found written on smooth plaster during the construction or renovation of a Nabataean temple. The building is dated to around the first half of the second century CE, while its restoration took place in the first half of the fourth century CE.¹⁶

The Graffito of Wadi Ram: An inscription in cursive Nabataean script, written in black ink on the wall of a Nabataean temple. The building lies near Jabal Ram, about 50 kilometers from Aqaba. The writing is dated to the end of the first century CE; it was discovered by Horsfield and dated to 147 CE.¹⁷

Late Nabataean Texts of the Third and Fourth Centuries CE

Among the late Nabataean texts written in the third and fourth centuries CE are the following inscriptions:

1. The Wadi al-Muktab inscription¹⁸: consists of two lines and is dated to 210 CE.
2. The Wadi Firan inscription¹⁹: consists of three lines and is dated to the year 126 of the era of Sal', that is, 230 CE.
3. The Mada'in Salih inscription: dated to the year 162 of the era of Sal', that is, 267 CE, and consisting of nine lines, as mentioned earlier.
4. The Sinai inscription: as mentioned earlier, dated to the year 148 of the era of Sal', that is, 253 CE.²⁰

The earliest Nabataean writings appeared among the Sinaitic inscriptions, found in the valleys of the Sinai desert. Sinaitic writing, consisting of graffiti, numbers close to 3,000 inscriptions. Because the Sinaitic writings resemble the Nabataean Hauranian writings, the Sinaitic inscriptions have since been counted among the Nabataean writings. As the Nabataeans developed culturally and became possessors of culture and thought, they were able to develop their writing from mere graffiti into a script distinct from its parent Aramaic script, in the latter half of the first century BCE.²¹

Historical Arabic Texts Discovered by Orientalists, Written in the Arabic Script

The Umm al-Jimal Text (250 CE): A text written in the Nabataean language and script, found at the site of Umm al-Jimal in Syria. Its text reads: 'Dnh nafshu Fahru bar Sulay rabbī Gadhima malik Tanūkh.' It was transcribed by the scholar Dussaud, first in Hebrew characters, and then translated into Arabic as follows: 'This is the tomb of Fahr son of Suli, tutor of Gadhima, king of Tanukh.' The writing of the Umm al-Jimal text²² points to a shared

¹³Khirbat al-Khalidi: located not far from the entrance of the valley; this ruin is one link in the chain of Nabataean fortresses built to protect the caravan route. Harding, Lankester: *Athar al-Urdunn* [The Antiquities of Jordan], Arabized by Sulayman Musa, 1st ed. (Jordan: Publications of the Jordanian Committee for Arabization, Translation and Publishing, 1965), p. 140.

¹⁴Khirbat Kathara: located at the confluence of Wadi al-Yamm (al-Jadd) with Wadi al-Yamm (al-'Umran); it resembles the fortresses in its engineering and construction style. The southern track to Wadi Ram passes through Wadi al-Yamm (al-'Umran), though crossing it is sometimes hindered by dense sand blown by the wind, which occasionally covers the track. Harding: *Athar al-Urdunn*, p. 140.

¹⁵al-Majidi, Khaza'l: *al-Anbat (al-Tarikh - al-Mythologia - al-Funun)* [The Nabataeans: History, Mythology, Arts], 1st ed. (Syria: Dar al-Muhaka, 2012), p. 106.

¹⁶Gruendler: *A History of Arabic Scripts...*, p. 36.

¹⁷Ajlouni: *The Civilization of the Nabataeans...*, p. 112; Gruendler: *A History of Arabic Scripts...*, p. 29.

¹⁸Wadi al-Muktab: located in the Sinai Peninsula. al-Qaysi, Nahid 'Abd al-Razzaq: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi* [History of the Arabic Script] (Amman: Dar al-Manahij, 2018), p. 21.

¹⁹Wadi Firan: a valley located in Sinai. 'Ali: *al-Mufasssal...*, vol. 15, p. 175.

²⁰Nami, Khalil Yahya: "The Origin of the Arabic Script and the History of Its Development up to the Eve of Islam," vol. 3, no. 1 (Cairo, 1935), pp. 66–67; al-Qaysi: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, p. 21.

²¹Rahima, 'Abd al-Qadir 'Akul: *al-Khatt al-'Arabi: Mafhumuhu al-Tarikhi wa-l-Jamali* [The Arabic Script: Its Historical and Aesthetic Concept] (Amman: Dar al-Manahij, 2018), pp. 92–93.

²²See Figure 1.

page of history between the two ruling houses of al-Hira and Palmyra, since the inscription found at Palmyra on the statue of Queen al-Zabba', as mentioned earlier, was dated to 271 CE — that is, contemporary with this text, which dates to the time of Gadhima al-Abrash, as noted earlier²³. It is naturally difficult to determine how the king's tutor died in this location: whether he was a visitor to these lands whose death overtook him there, or whether he came with his master on a military campaign and died at that place. The stone has nonetheless done us the valuable service of recording the name of the tomb's occupant.²⁴

This inscription was discovered by the German archaeologist Littmann at the site known as 'Umm al-Jimal,' located west of Hauran and southwest of Damascus. The inscription occupies three short lines comprising nine words made up of thirty-one letters, some of which are joined and others separate. This text is distinguished by the presence of ligatures between letters, a phenomenon absent from the Aramaic script.²⁵

The symbols of the Fahr ibn Sulay inscription may be deciphered as follows:²⁶

1. Dnh npšw Prw
2. bršlym rbw gdynt
3. mlk tnw□

The Fahr ibn Sulay inscription, translated into Arabic and rendered here in English, reads:

1. This is the tomb of Fahr,
2. son of Suli, tutor of Gadhima,
3. king of Tanukh.

The text comprises two parts, one Greek and the other Nabataean-Arabic, and the two correspond exactly in meaning. The Nabataean-Arabic text was discovered before the Greek text; the two were found at two different locations within the Umm al-Jimal area of Hauran, yet their correspondence leaves no doubt that they were originally paired together.²⁷

It may accordingly be said that the first Umm al-Jimal text is a Nabataean inscription in both script and language, and that it belongs to the tomb of an Arab man, as indicated by his name (Fahr ibn Sulay). The inscription contains independent letters unrelated to the Aramaic letters or to the other scripts prevailing in the era of the text (the third century CE).²⁸

It may further be said that this inscription, together with other texts found in the region south of Damascus, is closely connected to the Nabataean texts and may even belong to the corpus of Nabataean texts, owing both to the similarity of the script form and to the geographical proximity between the location of these texts and the land of the Nabataeans.

The Namara Text (328 CE): Namara is considered the oldest Arabic text discovered, found by René Dussaud and Macler about 100 km southeast of Damascus. It represents the oldest surviving text in the Arabic language, although it still bears Nabataean features. The Namara text is carved on the upper lintel of the entrance to the tomb of Imru' al-Qays, the second Lakhmid ruler of al-Hira, whom the inscription titles 'king of all the Arabs.' The

²³al-Masrif, Zayn al-Din: *Mawsu'at al-Khatt al-'Arabi* [Encyclopedia of the Arabic Script], 1st ed. (Iraq: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiyya al-'Amma, 1990), vol. 3, p. 59; Dallou, Burhan al-Din: *Jazirat al-'Arab qabl al-Islam (al-Tarikh al-Iqtisadi – al-Ijtima'i – al-Thaqafi – wa-l-Siyasi)* [The Arabian Peninsula before Islam: Economic, Social, Cultural, and Political History], 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2007), p. 221.

²⁴Ali: *al-Mufasssal...*, vol. 5, p. 184.

²⁵Rahima: *al-Khatt al-'Arabi...*, pp. 92–93.

²⁶Wolfensohn: *Tarikh al-Lughat al-Samiyya* [History of the Semitic Languages], p. 139.

²⁷Ba'albaki, Ramzi: *al-Kitaba al-'Arabiyya wa-l-Samiyya (Dirasat fi Tarikh al-Kitaba wa-Usuliha 'ind al-Samiyyin)* [Arabic and Semitic Writing: Studies in the History of Writing and Its Origins among the Semites], pp. 143–144.

²⁸Rahima: *al-Khatt al-'Arabi...*, p. 94.

Lakhmid ruler of the kingdom of al-Hira, Imru' al-Qays, received considerable scholarly attention because of this text, and the date of his death (328 CE) was established on the basis of specialists' readings of the text.²⁹

This inscription is also known as the 'Namara Stone' or the 'Text of Imru' al-Qays.' It dates to around 328 CE and was discovered by the French expedition at the beginning of the twentieth century in the village of Namara, east of Jabal al-'Arab near Damascus.

The Namara text is considered the first text written in a dialect close to that of Quraysh³⁰. It shows that Imru' al-Qays, the occupant of the tomb, was a warrior and a great commander who subdued the tribes of Asad and Nizar, defeated Madhhij, subjugated Ma'add, and whose conquests reached the walls of Najran, the city of Shammar. Through these conquests he came to control most of the Arabian Peninsula. The Namara inscription serves as the tombstone of an Arab king named Imru' al-Qays, found at the site of Namara.³¹

Namara had been a small Roman fortress³², and the Namara text³³ was found in the eastern Harra of Jabal al-Duruz.³⁴

The text consists of five lines, transliterated as follows:³⁵

1. ty nfs mr' lqys br 'mrw mlk 'l'rb klh dw 'sr tg
2. wmlk 'l'sdyn wnzrw mlwkhm whrb mdhgw 'kdy wg'
3. yzgy fy hbg ngrn mdynt šmr wmlk m'dw wnzl bnyh
4. 'lš'wb wwklhn frsw lrrwm flm yblg mlk mblgh
5. 'kdy. hlk 'm (223) ywm 7 bksl'wl bls'd dw wldh

'This inscription consists of five lines in Nabataean script, carved on a basalt tablet measuring 116 × 33 cm. It has been published and translated³⁶, and commented upon more than once³⁷, and its translated text reads as follows:³⁸

1. This is the tomb of Imru' al-Qays, son of 'Amr, king of all the Arabs, who wore the crown,
2. and ruled the two Asads and Nizar and their kings, and routed Madhhij thereafter with his might,
3. and came to Najran, the city of Shammar, ruled Ma'add, and settled his sons

²⁹Gruendler: *A History of Arabic Scripts...*, p. 34; Barreau [Brau], Tawfiq: *Tarikh al-'Arab al-Qadim* [Ancient History of the Arabs], p. 52.

³⁰al-Masrif: *Mawsu'at al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, vol. 3, p. 60.

³¹Ali: *al-Mufasssal...*, vol. 3, pp. 190–191.

³²Wolfensohn, Israel: *Tarikh al-Lughat al-Samiyya*, 1st ed. (Egypt: Matba'at al-I'timad, 1929), p. 189.

³³See Figure 2.

³⁴Jabal al-Duruz: also called "Jabal Hauran," extending eastward toward the desert, and appearing in its layout as an island separate from the surrounding region. Kurd 'Ali, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Razzaq ibn Muhammad (d. 1372 AH): *Khitat al-Sham*, 3rd ed. (Damascus: Maktabat al-Nuri, 1983), vol. 5, p. 205.

³⁵Ali: *al-Mufasssal...*, vol. 3, p. 191; al-Qaysi: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, p. 23; Rahima: *al-Khatt al-'Arabi...*, p. 96; 'Abbada, 'Abd al-Fattah: *Intishar al-Khatt al-'Arabi fi al-'Alam al-Sharqi wa-l-'Alam al-Gharbi* [The Spread of the Arabic Script in the Eastern and Western World] (United Kingdom: Hindawi Foundation, 2017), p. 16.

³⁶See Figure 3.

³⁷Pigulevskaya, Nina Viktorovna: *al-'Arab 'ala Hudud Byzantia wa-Iran min al-Qarn al-Rabi' ila al-Qarn al-Sadis al-Miladi* [The Arabs on the Frontiers of Byzantium and Iran from the Fourth to the Sixth Century CE], trans. Hashim Salah al-Din 'Uthman (n.p.: Department of Arab Heritage, 1964), p. 40.

³⁸Wolfensohn: *Tarikh al-Lughat al-Samiyya*, p. 190; al-Qaysi: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, p. 23; Pigulevskaya: *al-'Arab 'ala Hudud Byzantia wa-Iran...*, p. 40.

4. among the peoples as governors. The Persians and the Romans deputed him, and no king reached his rank
5. up to that time. He died in the year 223, on the seventh day of Kanun al-Awwal (December), to the good fortune of those he left behind.

It is clear from the foregoing that the Arabic of the scribe of this text does not belong to the Arabic of the Lihyanites or the Safaitic, who used ha (ه) as the definite article, nor to the Arabic of the peoples of the South, who used n (ن) at the end of a word as a definite marker. This is evidenced by the use of 'al -' as the definite article in several places in the text — in the words al-Qays, al-taj (the crown), al-Asadayn (the two tribes of Banu Asad), and al-shu'ub (the peoples). The scribe also used constructions and expressions found in no Arabic dialect other than Classical Arabic, the language later used by the Qur'an, which suggests that its authors were themselves speakers of that dialect. The Namara text is thus complete in its Arab character, both in its nouns and verbs and in its use of the definite article al-. Moreover, its script, while derived from the Nabataean script, represents a forerunner of the Arabic script, since it already displays ligatures between letters and more rounded letterforms.³⁹

We may conclude, therefore, that the Namara text represents an advanced and important historical stage constituting the most prominent development toward the Arabic alphabetic script (Classical Arabic). It precedes all the other Nabataean texts mentioned above. Although it is indeed one of the Aramaic-derived scripts, it may be said that this text represents the true beginning of the emergence of Classical Arabic in the subsequent stages.

Archaeologists discovered, among the ruins of the great Lakhmid capital, Christian remains dating to 193 CE. Excavation was carried out at eleven mounds located within a stretch of land four miles from Kufa, each mound being assigned a number by the excavators. Remains of two churches dating to the eighth or ninth century CE were found there. German excavators had earlier found at Ctesiphon (Salman Pak), as mentioned earlier, in 1928, the remains of a church considered at the time the first evidence to emerge from the ground of an Iraqi Christian culture; they also found fragments of a finely crafted stucco statue of a bishop. Archaeologists likewise found among the ruins of al-Hira small tablets of fine plaster bearing inscriptions, the cross being their principal motif, either carved and painted red or left in relief with the surrounding ground cut away. These crosses are of excellent workmanship, the lower or base sheet having its own distinctive coloring; their manufacture appears to be closely related to crosses carved into rock.⁴⁰

The Zabad Stone Inscription (511 CE): Named after the site where it was found, this inscription was discovered among the ruins of 'Zabad,' between Qinnasrin and the Euphrates, southeast of Aleppo. It was written in three languages: Greek, Syriac, and Arabic⁴¹. It is not a translation of the Greek-Syriac dedication but rather records the names of the Aramaean founders of the building. This inscription, which differs considerably from the Namara text, deserves to be called 'Arabic,' since it displays all the features of ordinary joined-letter writing.⁴²

Its text was carved on a stone built into a church, with a cross depicted at its center; it recorded the names of the benefactors⁴³ who contributed to its construction. The Orientalists Dussaud, Levinson, and Lidzbarski

³⁹Dallou: *Jazirat al-'Arab qabl al-Islam...*, p. 223.

⁴⁰Ghunayma, Yusuf Rizq Allah: *al-Hira: al-Madina wa-l-Mamlaka al-'Arabiyya* [al-Hira: The City and the Arab Kingdom] (Baghdad: Matba'at Dinkur al-Haditha, 1936), pp. 82–87.

⁴¹Ali: *al-Mufasssal...*, vol. 15, p. 176; al-Qaysi: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, p. 26; al-Jubouri, Suhayla Yasin: *Asl al-Khatt al-'Arabi wa-Tatawwuruhi hatta Nihayat al-'Asr al-Umawi* [The Origin of the Arabic Script and Its Development until the End of the Umayyad Era], published MA thesis, University of Baghdad, 1977, p. 51; Nami: "The Origin of the Arabic Script..." p. 89.

⁴²Blachère, Régis: *Tarikh al-Adab al-'Arabi (al-'Asr al-Jahili)* [History of Arabic Literature: The Jahiliyya Period], Arabized by Ibrahim al-Kilani (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, n.d.), p. 71.

⁴³See Figure 4.

succeeded in reading the text; the agreed-upon line reads: 'In the name of the god Sharahu bu... with Qaysar... son of Mar al-Qays.'⁴⁴

The Arabic text comprises nineteen distinct (non-repeated) letters. Among the letters that recur, alif occurs four times; lam, ha, and ya three times each; sin/shin five times; ra six times; and 'ayn and mim twice each.⁴⁵

The importance of the Zabad inscription lies in the fact that the characteristic features of the Arabic script are fully integrated within it; the Zabad writing deserves to be called 'Arabic,' since it contains all the features of ordinary joined-letter writing.⁴⁶

The Usays Text (528 CE): Found on Jabal Usays, 105 km southeast of Damascus, and discovered by the German archaeological expedition working in the region in 1965. The text consists of four lines⁴⁷, reading as follows:⁴⁸

1. Ibrahim ibn Mughira al-Awsi
2. was sent by al-Harith the king to
3. Sulayman, the garrison, in the year
4. 423.

This text is entirely Arabic, and its date follows the Bosra era, one of the dating systems that preceded the Christian era by 105 years. Adding 105 years to 423 gives the date 528 CE. The Bosra calendar, associated with St. John the Baptist⁴⁹, is known as the Bosra era.⁵⁰

The Hauran (Harran) Text (568 CE): An inscription was found at Harran al-Laja, in the northern part of Jabal al-Duruz, written in Greek and Arabic and known as the 'Harran Inscription.'⁵¹ It is thought to be a memorial stone erected by a prince of Kinda on the occasion of the construction of a church dedicated to St. John the Baptist, as mentioned earlier, dated to 463 years after the fall of Bosra, corresponding to 568 CE.⁵²

Littmann succeeded in reading it correctly, after Orientalists had failed to do so for more than half a century. Its text reads: 'I, Sharahil ibn Zalim, built this martyrion in the year 463, a year after the destruction of Khaybar.'⁵³ It may be said that the Harran inscription⁵⁴ is among the most important and valuable of the early texts for the historian of the Arabic language, being written in the dialect of the Qur'an, with the exception of a slight Nabataean trace still discernible in it.⁵⁵

⁴⁴al-Masrif: *Mawsu'at al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, vol. 3, p. 61; Murad, Hassan Subhi: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi bayn al-Madi wa-l-Hadir* [History of the Arabic Script between Past and Present], 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Manahil, 2000), p. 51.

⁴⁵al-Jubouri: *Asl al-Khatt al-'Arabi...*, p. 52.

⁴⁶Dallou: *Jazirat al-'Arab qabl al-Islam...*, p. 224.

⁴⁷See Figure 5.

⁴⁸al-Qaysi: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, p. 26; Rahima: *al-Khatt al-'Arabi...*, p. 115; Gruendler: *A History of Arabic Scripts...*, p. 37; al-Jubouri: *Asl al-Khatt al-'Arabi...*, p. 53.

⁴⁹John the Baptist: a name given by Christians to Yahya (peace be upon him), on account of his baptizing of Christ. When God commanded him to call people to the Christian faith, Yahya immersed him in the Jordan River... al-Jamili, 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ulaymi (d. 928 AH): *al-Uns al-Jalil bi-Tarikh al-Quds wa-l-Khalil*, ed. 'Adnan Yunus 'Abd al-Majid, 1st ed. (n.p.: Maktabat Dandis, 1420 AH), vol. 1, p. 269.

⁵⁰al-Qaysi: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, p. 27.

⁵¹Ali: *al-Mufasssal...*, vol. 15, p. 177.

⁵²Rahima: *al-Khatt al-'Arabi...*, p. 114; Wolfensohn: *Tarikh al-Lughat al-Samiyya*, p. 192; Nami: "The Origin of the Arabic Script...", p. 90.

⁵³al-Masrif: *Mawsu'at al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, vol. 3, p. 61; Wolfensohn: *Tarikh al-Lughat al-Samiyya*, p. 192; Murad: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi bayn al-Madi wa-l-Hadir*, p. 52.

⁵⁴See Figure 6.

⁵⁵Ali: *al-Mufasssal...*, vol. 15, p. 177.

The Second Umm al-Jimal Text: Found at Umm al-Jimal and called 'the second' to distinguish it from the tombstone of 'Fahr ibn Sulay'⁵⁶, it is located in a building known as the Double Church, discovered by the Princeton University archaeological expedition to Syria between 1904 and 1905. Littmann considers that it was executed by Christian Arabs. It is carved on a basalt stone measuring 31 × 62 cm and is the only text among these to lack a date. The archaeologists who studied it attribute it to the sixth century CE⁵⁷, and its language is close to Arabic, being to a considerable degree free of Nabataean and Aramaic influence.⁵⁸

The inscription consists of five short lines⁵⁹, reading as follows:⁶⁰

1. 'God forgive Ulayh,
2. son of 'Ubayd, the scribe,
3. of 'Ubayd, over the sons of
4. 'Amr; he wrote it for him from
5. [reads]' — the final word is unclear.

The text comprises fourteen letters. The letters dal, kaf, and ra each recur twice; nun and ba' each recur three times; and alif, lam, ha, 'ayn, and ya each recur five times.⁶¹

In addition to these texts, there is other evidence of the use of the Arabic script before Islam, including the suspended odes (al-Mu'allaqat), said to have been hung on the Ka'ba, religious writings, and the writing of covenants, treaties, and alliances — since the pre-Islamic Arabs engaged in numerous wars, among them the War of al-Basus⁶² and others, with truces periodically concluded and covenants and treaties recorded between the parties. Commercial deeds were likewise used, in which the pre-Islamic Arabs recorded their trade accounts and mutual obligations, in addition to the exchange of letters between individuals carrying news.⁶³

It is noteworthy that the locations of these texts are largely confined to the central or north-central region of the Arabian lands, extending from al-'Ula and Mada'in Salih to the northern part of Hauran, as mentioned earlier, whereas in the south-central region and the heartland of the Hijaz only a small number of inscriptions have been found compared with the north-central region.⁶⁴

As for the graffiti produced by the inhabitants of the Nabataean lands, these are numerous, and the majority contain recorded directions bearing personal names, illustrating the pattern of the desert and the routes of communication through which trade caravans and Bedouin travelled between the centers of the Nabataean lands. Many of them are religious in nature, and most of these texts fall into two categories: the first

⁵⁶Ba'albaki: *al-Kitaba al-'Arabiyya wa-l-Samiyya...*, p. 156.

⁵⁷al-Jubouri, Yahya Wahib: *al-Khatt wa-l-Kitaba fi al-Hadara al-'Arabiyya* [Script and Writing in Arab Civilization], 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-'Arab al-Islami, 1994), p. 33.

⁵⁸Ali: *al-Mufasssal...*, vol. 15, p. 178.

⁵⁹See Figure 7.

⁶⁰al-Qaysi: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, pp. 27–28; Murad: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi bayn al-Madi wa-l-Hadir*, p. 49;

Ba'albaki: *al-Kitaba al-'Arabiyya wa-l-Samiyya...*, p. 156; Dallou: *Jazirat al-'Arab qabl al-Islam...*, p. 226.

⁶¹al-Jubouri (Suhayla Yasin): *Asl al-Khatt al-'Arabi...*, p. 55.

⁶²The War of al-Basus: fought between Bakr and Taghlib, both of Rabi'a, and lasting many years; it was not a single war but a series of wars occurring intermittently. Its cause was that al-Nawa'il ibn Rabi'a, known as "Kulayb" of Taghlib, had attained a position of great authority and influence, especially after his victory on the Day of Khazaz, when all the tribes of Ma'add gathered under his banner and crowned him. He attained such prestige that a proverb was coined about his might: "Mightier than Kulayb Wa'il." Overcome with pride, he transgressed all bounds, appropriating a tract of land — known as a "hima" — and forbidding anyone from treading upon it. Barreau [Brau], Tawfiq: *Tarikh al-'Arab al-Qadim*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Dar al-Fikr, 2001), p. 213.

⁶³al-Qaysi: *Tarikh al-Khatt al-'Arabi*, pp. 28–29.

⁶⁴Damra, Ibrahim: *al-Khatt al-'Arabi: Judhuruhi wa-Tatawwuruhi* [The Arabic Script: Its Roots and Development], 2nd ed. (Jordan: Maktabat al-Manar, 1987), p. 39.

commemorates the construction or restoration of a temple, and the second records the dedication of an offering to a deity. Most of the texts found here are written in an Aramaic dialect, particularly in the Nabataean lands.⁶⁵

We may conclude from the aforementioned texts, which appeared primarily in the kingdom of the Nabataeans and its surroundings and, secondarily, in the kingdom of al-Hira, that the peoples of these two kingdoms had the primary credit for the use of Classical Arabic (the Arabic alphabetic script), which subsequently spread along with the economic activities they practiced, chiefly commercial activity.

Conclusion

By the grace and guidance of God, at the conclusion of this research entitled 'Historical Inscriptions of the Arabic Script of al-Hira and the Nabataeans and Their Surroundings,' the study has arrived at the following principal findings:

1. The texts constitute the historical evidence left to us by the society of the Arabian Peninsula, represented by ancient writings such as the Assyrian or Babylonian records and by the later writings found in the Hijaz, Greater Syria, and elsewhere, represented by the Thamudic, Lihyanite, Nabataean, and South Arabian scripts.
2. These texts reveal that the kingdoms of al-Hira and the Nabataeans employed the Arabic script in their writings, which were subsequently translated into Arabic, as indicated by the historical texts discussed throughout the research.
3. The texts that appeared in the kingdom of the Nabataeans and its surroundings, and in the kingdom of al-Hira, indicate that the peoples of these two kingdoms had the primary credit for the use of Classical Arabic, which later spread along with the economic activities they practiced, particularly commercial activity.
4. The historical texts of the kingdoms of al-Hira and the Nabataeans and their surroundings are numerous and appear under various names, including the Namara text, the Umm al-Jimal texts, the Zabad Stone text, the Usays text, the Hauran text, and others. They were discovered at different periods and have become an important historical source for researchers and scholars seeking to understand the history of the ancient Arab kingdoms, particularly with regard to the early beginnings of the Arabic script.

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⁶⁵al-Bas, Peter: *al-Hayat al-Diniyya 'ind al-Anbat (Dhakirat al-Makan al-Muqaddas min Hawran ila al-Hijaz)* [Religious Life among the Nabataeans: The Memory of Sacred Space from Hauran to the Hijaz], trans. Husayb Ilyas Hadid (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Akademi lil-Abhath, 2020), pp. 30–31.

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