The Disappearance of Writing Systems

Dedicated to the memory of Jeremy Black (1951–2004)

The Disappearance of Writing Systems

Perspectives on Literacy and Communication

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The Phoenix of Phoinikēia:
Alphabetic Reincarnation in Arabia

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The Two Alphabetic Traditions

Shortly after its invention in the second millennium BC, the alphabet split into two traditions. One of these—the Phoenico-Aramaic—spread both west to the Greeks[1] and beyond, and east, across Asia as far as Manchuria (Stary, in this volume), becoming the ancestor of all but one of the traditional alphabets in use today.[2] By contrast, the other—South Semitic—alphabetic tradition was used almost exclusively within the Arabian Peninsula[3] in antiquity, and only one of its descendants has survived into the modern world (Fig. 9.1).

Neither tradition had dedicated signs for representing vowels and neither showed doubled letters. Moreover, it was singularly unfortunate that the first widely used linear alphabet was designed to express Phoenician, which had one of the smallest repertoires of consonantal phonemes of any Semitic language.[4] Alas, the twenty-two letters of the Phoenician alphabet were treated as sacrosanct within the Near East, and the non-Phoenician Near Eastern languages which came to be written in it were squeezed into this rigid frame, regardless of the resulting ambiguities.[5]

By contrast, the South Semitic scripts had a fluid number of letters which represented far more effectively the consonantal repertoires of the languages they were transcribing. When a South Semitic script was used to write a previously unrecorded language, users simply took the letters needed to express its consonantal phonemes, and ignored those which were irrelevant, or changed the value of a letter to represent a different sound.[6] The result is that letters of
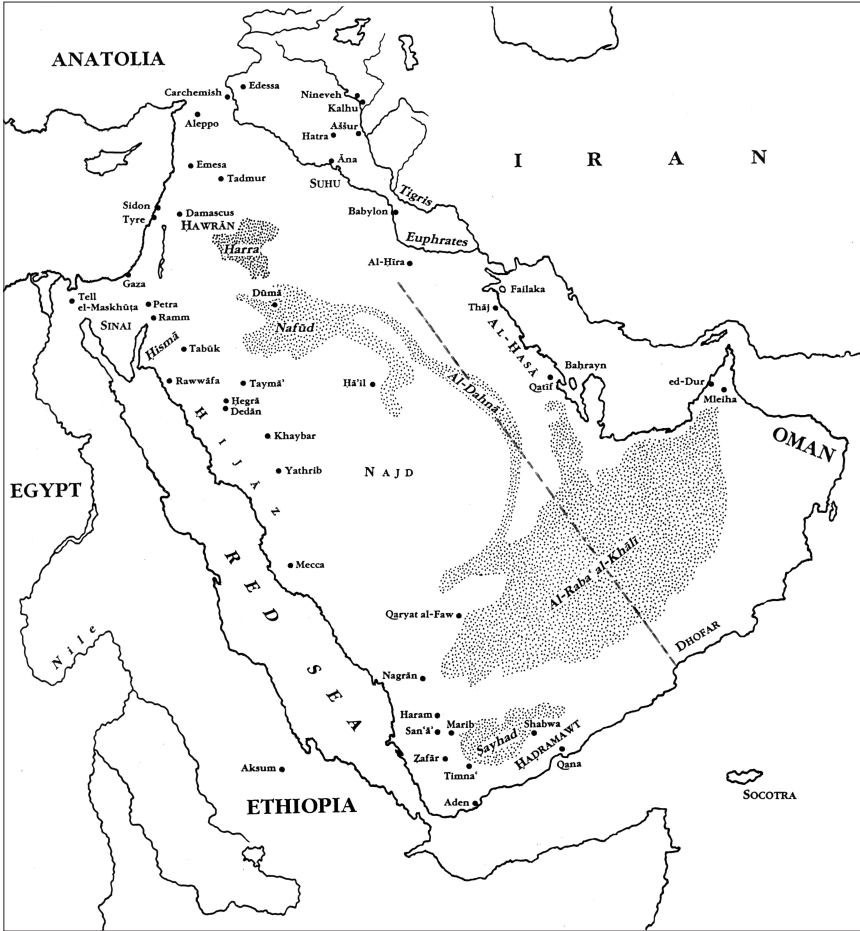
Figure 9.1   A sketch map of Arabia showing the places and languages mentioned in the text, and the rough geographical division between the west, where languages were written, and the east where they were not.

the same, or similar, form can represent unrelated sounds in different South Semitic alphabets, but within a particular script there is little if any ambiguity as to the phonemes represented (see Fig. 9.2), because—apart from the rare use of matres lectionis[7]—one sign represented only one phoneme. In this, the users of the South Semitic alphabets showed the same spirit as the archaic Greeks, who had no qualms about adapting the letters of the Phoenician alphabet, and inventing new signs, to express their local dialects and local tastes (see Sherratt 2003 and Luraghi forthcoming).

The South Semitic alphabetic tradition consisted of two major groups, the

Figure 9.2   Script table of the Ancient North Arabian [ANA] alphabets.

Ancient North Arabian [ANA][8] alphabets and the South Arabian. Each of these groups was made up of a number of different scripts, and from the South Arabian monumental script developed the one modern survivor of this tradition: the Ethiopic vocalized alphabet.[9]

Written and Unwritten Languages in Ancient Arabia (Fig. 9.3)

In the Arabian Peninsula, north of Yemen, two groups of North Arabian dialects[10] were spoken. One group consisted of what is now generally called 'Old Arabic', that is, dialects which later developed into the written and spoken forms of Arabic which we know from the seventh century AD onwards (Macdonald 2000: 29–30, 48–57; 2008). Until the late pre-Islamic period, Arabic was a purely spoken tongue, co-existing with numerous written languages in the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Egypt.[11] Before the sixth century AD, it was written only exceptionally, in scripts which usually expressed other languages. It was only shortly before the rise of Islam (seventh century AD) that it became associated with a particular alphabet, and only with the Islamic conquests that writing in Arabic became widespread. The other subgroup of 'North Arabian' is known as 'Ancient North Arabian' and consists of a collection of dialects which were spoken and written in the oases of central and north-west Arabia, and by nomads in the western two-thirds of the Peninsula from the borders of Yemen to Palmyra (Macdonald 2000: 29–30, 41–6). The Ancient North Arabian dialects and Old Arabic are very closely related and would certainly have been mutually comprehensible. Indeed, in the unvocalized ANA and South Arabian scripts they are sometimes difficult to distinguish.[12]

Languages used in Pre-Islamic Arabia				
South Arabia		**North and Central Arabia**		
INDIGENOUS	IMPORTED	INDIGENOUS	INDIGENOUS	IMPORTED
ANCIENT SOUTH ARABIAN	ARABIC	ANCIENT NORTH ARABIAN	ARABIC	
(Written languages)	*(Normally unwritten)*	(All written languages)	*(Normally unwritten)*	(All written languages)
		Languages of the oases		
Sabaic }	*Old Arabic*	Dumaitic	*Old Arabic*	Akkadian
Madhabic } } Sayhadic		Taymanitic		Imperial Aramaic
Qatabanic } group		Dadanitic		Nabataean Aramaic
Hadramitic }		Hasaitic (?)		Greek
		Languages of the nomads		
		Hismaic		
		Safaitic		
		'Thamudic' dialects		
	Normally <u>written</u> languages, in Roman type	*Normally <u>unwritten</u> languages, in italics*		

Figure 9.3   A list of the principal written and unwritten languages in ancient Arabia.

However, as far as we can tell, Arabic speakers rarely used the ANA and South Arabian alphabets,[13] and at present it is difficult to explain why.

The oasis scripts of north-west Arabia

In north-west Arabia (Fig. 9.1), from perhaps as early as the eighth century BC, the inhabitants of each of the large oases, at Dadan (Biblical Dedān, modern al-ʿUlā), Taymāʾ, and Dūma (modern al-Jawf), developed their own forms of the South Semitic alphabet,[14] in which they wrote the Ancient North Arabian dialects spoken in these towns. The caravans of the frankincense trade had to pass through these oases on their way from the producers in South Arabia to the consumers in Mesopotamia, the Levant, Egypt, and the Mediterranean, and the oases grew rich on the profits (Macdonald 1997).

The coming of Aramaic

The desire to control this lucrative trade, soon aroused the greed of neighbouring empires and, in the mid-sixth century BC, the last king of Babylon, Nabonidus, conquered the major North Arabian oases and settled for ten years in Taymāʾ (Ephʿal 1982: 179–91; Beaulieu 1989: 149–85). He brought with him a bureaucracy which introduced Aramaic to Taymāʾ as the language of administration and this must have continued under the Persian empire, which conquered Babylon shortly afterwards. Under this pressure, the local ANA alphabet (Taymanitic) apparently soon fell out of use (though dating is a problem), and the Aramaic script in Taymāʾ followed a local development until the turn of the era when northern Arabia was absorbed into the Nabataean kingdom.

The Nabataeans were a nomadic tribe which, some time in the third century BC, settled down in what is now southern Jordan. They founded a kingdom which eventually stretched from southern Syria to northern Arabia. It is not absolutely certain what language they spoke, though for some, at least, it was probably a dialect of Old Arabic. However, they used as their written language a dialect of Aramaic expressed in a particular version of the Aramaic script.

Under the Babylonian and Persian empires, Aramaic had been the written language of government administration and the vehicle of international communication, from Egypt to Iran. Even after the conquests of Alexander the Great (333–323 BC), when Aramaic ceased to be the language of government, it remained the most common vehicle of written communication throughout the Levant and Mesopotamia. Under the Nabataeans, Aramaic became the new written language of prestige in the north-west Arabian oases of Ḥegrā (modern Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ), Dadan, Dūma, and Taymāʾ. The local ANA alphabets of north-west Arabia no doubt co-existed with Aramaic for a generation or two, before gradually falling into disuse, while in Taymāʾ—whose native ANA script had already disappeared in the Persian period—the local Aramaic script became

'regularized' to the Nabataean model. Thus, by the end of the first century AD, if not earlier, Aramaic had become the written language of the region, used both by speakers of Old Arabic—which had always been unwritten—and by those oasis-dwellers who spoke Ancient North Arabian dialects, which had now ceased to be written.

In AD 106, the Nabataean kingdom was annexed by the Romans and became the Province of Arabia. After the annexation, the language of official documents was changed to Greek. However, Nabataean Aramaic naturally continued to be used as a written language among many of the kingdom's former subjects. In the 'Nabataean heartland' of southern Jordan and the Negev, the epigraphic use of the Nabataean script gradually declined over the next century and a half, though there is no way of telling whether, or for how long, it continued to be used on perishable materials.

Understandably, it lingered on most successfully in peripheral areas, like north-west Arabia. The Romans recognized this and when, between AD 166 and 169, two successive governors of the Province of Arabia erected a Roman-style temple in the desert there, for a military unit levied from a local tribe,[15] the beautifully carved dedication to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus was written in Greek (for the Roman side) and Nabataean Aramaic as the 'local' written language. The transformation was now complete. The local oasis scripts of the South Semitic family, expressing local languages, had been superseded by an imported alphabet from the Phoenico-Aramaic tradition, expressing a 'foreign' written language, which had to be learned by those who wished to write.

Literate nomads and the South Semitic script

One of the unexpected features of Arabian history is that, from the early first millennium BC until, say, the fourth century AD, literacy was widespread throughout the western two-thirds of the Peninsula, not only in the settled areas of Yemen, and the oasis towns of north-west Arabia, but also among huge numbers of nomads, whose graffiti, in their scores of thousands, cover the desert rocks from the borders of Yemen right up into southern Syria.

Like most nomads, they did not need writing for communicating or recording information, for which they used word-of-mouth and highly developed memories. Their way of life was not suited to the preservation of texts on perishable materials, and reference documents on non-portable surfaces, such as stelae or cliff faces, are of little use to those of no fixed abode (see Macdonald 1993: 382–8, and Macdonald 2005: 75). However, writing did have one practical use for nomads. The life of a pastoralist involves long periods of enforced, usually solitary, idleness: guarding and tending the flocks while they pasture all day, or keeping watch for game or for enemies. In these situations anything which can relieve boredom is welcome. For thousands of years, these nomads had carved their tribal marks or drawn pictures on the rocks, sometimes with great skill.

When some nomads—probably out of curiosity while visiting an oasis—learnt the principle of writing, and the letters of one of the South Semitic alphabets, they must have returned to their encampments and demonstrated their new-found skills to their friends and relations.[16] With the powerful memories of the non-literate it would have taken very little time for the skill to have been learnt and passed on, and now those out with the flocks could pass the time by carving their names and genealogies, descriptions of what they were doing or would like to be doing, their thoughts, feelings, and prayers. Needless to say, they did not stop drawing, but now they signed their work—and sometimes other people's.[17]

Given that this was an endlessly entertaining way of banishing boredom, it is difficult to understand why, having used it for hundreds of years, the nomads stopped writing by the mid-fourth century AD.[18] One can speculate on the reasons for this, though I should make it clear that there is simply no evidence for any particular hypothesis. One possibility is that the literate nomads settled down and became farmers or town-dwellers. By the third century AD, Aramaic and Greek were the written languages in the settled areas of Arabia and Syria respectively. Thus, the ANA alphabets these nomads had used in the desert would have been incomprehensible in the towns and, apart perhaps from the desert's edge, in the countryside, and so would have been of no practical use to them. Nor would they now have needed their literacy in the ANA scripts to banish boredom, since as agricultural labourers and workers in towns they would no longer have been afflicted by the long periods of enforced solitary idleness characteristic of the life of the nomadic pastoralist.

The world of farmers and townsmen in Syria and Arabia in the fourth century AD—unlike that of earlier centuries in north-west Arabia—was apparently one in which literacy was largely unnecessary, except for the patrician class, bureaucrats and scribes, and possibly some merchants. Ironically, the 'literate nomads' who may have settled in the fourth century AD, would have come from a non-literate society,[19] where memory and oral communication had not been ousted by the advent of writing (see Macdonald 2005: 78). Looked at from this point of view, the nomad who settled was moving from a non-literate society to a non-literate enclave within a literate society, the only difference being that whereas he had used writing as a pastime in the desert, he no longer needed it in his new life as a townsman or farmer. The literate culture of the upper echelons of his new society, which was conducted in languages and scripts which were unknown to him, would have passed him by, and writing in his own script, which had never been used for communication and record but had only ever been a pastime, would rapidly fall into disuse. However, as I emphasized above, this can be no more than speculation, and all we can be sure of is that these desert alphabets ceased to be used.

Southern Arabia

Ancient Yemen was dominated by powerful states of which the most famous were Sabaʾ (Biblical Sheba), Qatabān, Maʿīn, and Ḥaḍramawt. Their written languages are known collectively as Ancient (or Epigraphic) South Arabian, or Sayhadic, and belong to the South Semitic linguistic group. The languages used by these four states were all written in the same monumental South Arabian alphabet. Both the script of the monumental inscriptions and the minuscule used for everyday documents incised on sticks, are now known to have been used from at least the tenth century BC, until the sixth century AD.[20]

There may also have been unwritten languages in South Arabia. Christian Robin has suggested that the Minaeans, when they settled in the Yemeni Jawf, took over a pre-existing written language, which he has called 'Madhabic', that was quite different from their spoken tongue (1991: 98). He has also suggested that the Himyarites, who ruled southern Arabia from the fourth to late sixth centuries, spoke a normally unwritten language but used Sabaic for their written documents (see Robin 1991: 96; 2001: 522–8); but recently this view has been questioned by Peter Stein (2003: 6–7; 2004: 229–32, 235–40) who has proposed a more convincing interpretation of the evidence (see Macdonald forthcoming c). However, one thing is certain: from about the turn of the era onwards, increasing numbers of Arabic-speakers gradually settled in Yemen.

By the first century AD, the kingdom of Sabaʾ had enjoyed a long period of political and cultural hegemony, during which time the Sabaic language, and the South Arabian script in which it was written, had become the prestige means of written communication and record in the southern half of the Peninsula.

This can be seen at a site called Qaryat al-Fāw, on the north-western edge of the Empty Quarter (see Fig. 9.1), where there are reportedly large numbers of Sabaic inscriptions. Qaryat al-Fāw (known in antiquity as Qaryat Dhāt Kahil) was a staging post on one of the routes of the frankincense caravans and had grown rich on the proceeds (al-Ansary 1982). It also became the 'capital' of a number of Arab tribes, Qaḥṭān, Madhḥij, and Kinda. The members of these tribes spoke Arabic, but, because it was not written, would normally have used Sabaic as their written language (if necessary through translators and scribes). However, there are some inscriptions at Fāw which are in the Arabic language written in the Sabaic script (Beeston 1979: 1–2; Macdonald 2000: 49–50; Robin 1991: 115–16; 2001: 549), and others where the author appears to have been trying to use correct Sabaic, but has filled in the gaps in his knowledge with Arabic words and phrases—a situation parallel to that in Ḥegrā described below. However, this brief experiment in writing Arabic in the South Arabian script appears to have came to nothing. This is a pity since the South Arabian alphabet had more than enough letters to express the full consonantal repertoire of Arabic, whereas the Aramaic alphabet, which was eventually used to write Arabic, did not.

In the early centuries AD, three major processes began in South Arabia. Firstly, the trickle of Arabic-speaking immigrants into Yemen from the north, became a stream and then a flood, making Arabic, for the first time, one of the most widely spoken languages in south-west Arabia, though one with no prestige there. Secondly, from the mid-fourth century AD, when the Himyarites conquered Ḥaḍramawt, until the mid-sixth century, Sabaic became the only habitually written language in South Arabia. Thirdly, during the same period, the number of inscriptions in Yemen declines dramatically, and after the Iranian conquest in the late sixth century, dated monumental inscriptions disappear altogether.

Thus, from the fourth century onwards, the balance of written and unwritten languages in South Arabia underwent a massive shift. In the past, Sabaic, Qatabanic, and Hadramatic had been the spoken and written languages of the kingdoms of Sabaʾ, Qatabān, and Ḥaḍramawt respectively, and only perhaps in Maʿīn were these different functions fulfilled by different languages. Now, there was only one written language, Sabaic, and ever-increasing numbers of people spoke an unwritten tongue, Arabic. The decline in numbers of inscriptions (and documents on sticks) between the fourth and late sixth centuries does not necessarily mean a decline in literacy or in the use of the Sabaic language, but it suggests that the publicly visible written word was less important in the societies of this period than in those of previous generations (see Macdonald forthcoming c). This was, after all, a period of religious and political turmoil in Yemen with rapid changes from paganism to Judaism to Christianity, and invasions by the Ethiopians and the Iranians. Whatever the reasons, by the mid-sixth century AD, there are no more datable monumental inscriptions and documents on sticks in the Sabaic language and South Arabian alphabet (Robin 1991: 19), and by the rise of Islam, in the early seventh, Arabia's last alphabet of the South Semitic tradition was terminally obsolescent, if not actually dead.[21]

The Reincarnation of a South Semitic Alphabet

Yet, from the fourth century AD onwards, at the very time the South Arabian alphabet in Yemen was beginning its slow drift towards oblivion, a new shoot was springing up on the other side of the Red Sea. By the turn of the era, Sabaean colonists had brought their alphabet to Ethiopia, and in the fourth century AD it was adapted in a way which is unique among the alphabets used by Semitic languages.

Both the Phoenico-Aramaic tradition (as used in the Near East) and the South Semitic produced purely consonantal alphabets, though the Aramaic alphabet and its descendants adopted the system of matres lectionis by which some letters representing consonants (ʾālaph, hē, waw, yūdh) could, in certain circumstances, represent a long vowel. Among the South Semitic alphabets, only Dada-

nitic regularly used matres lectionis, and, for the most part, the other alphabets of this family remained severely consonantal (though for possible exceptions see Robin 2001: 570–7).

In Ethiopia, however, a novel approach was adopted. The obsolescent South Arabian consonantal alphabet was reincarnated as a vocalized one, not with dedicated vowel letters, as in Greek, nor with matres lectionis, but by modifying the shape of each letter in a largely consistent manner to indicate the vowel which follows it (cf. Kharoṣṭhī). At the same time, some of the twenty-nine letters of the Sabaic alphabet were eliminated because they did not represent Ethiopic phonemes; one letter was re-assigned to an Ethiopic sound which had not existed in Sabaic; and a new letter was invented: the final product being a vocalized alphabet in which each of the twenty-six letters has seven different forms indicating the consonant, plus the vowel which follows it.[22] This reincarnation was very much in the tradition of the South Semitic family of alphabets, which were adapted more or less to fit the languages they expressed.

Arabic and the Reincarnation of a Phoenico-Aramaic Alphabet

As pointed out above, the Phoenico-Aramaic alphabet, in the Near East, appears to have been treated as a 'fixed system': users were unwilling to add to or to subtract from the original twenty-two letters. Any changes or improvements had to be made within the existing system. This was done either by giving some letters multiple values (e.g. by making a letter a mater lectionis or by making it represent more than one consonant), or by using discrete diacritical points and other marks as clues to the correct reading of the text.[23] These points and marks were not considered to be essential elements of the script and so could be—and usually were—omitted, without in any way changing the meaning of what was written. This, if not apparent from prior knowledge, had to be divined from the context.

Nor were these the only obstacles to reading. In many Middle Eastern alphabets of the Phoenico-Aramaic tradition, the forms of two or more letters had become identical. From an early stage in Aramaic, d and r were indistinguishable and remained so in many of its offshoots: e.g. early and 'Classical' Nabataean, Palmyrene, and Syriac.[24] At various times, in different forms of the Aramaic alphabet, other letters developed identical forms. In an Aramaic text from the Arabian/Persian Gulf the letters d, k, ᶜ, and r have an identical shape; as do ḥ and m; l and n; and q and t (Teixidor 1992: 696, and see Puech 1998: 37–48, copy and script table on 54–5). As a result, the number of distinct letter-forms in this text was reduced from twenty-two to thirteen. This, combined with an inability to show short vowels, medial [aː], or doubled consonants; an inability to distinguish between [iː] and [eː], or between [oː] and [uː]; and no division between words, makes one wonder why anybody bothered to write in such a script! Yet,

clearly they did. Indeed, the Pahlavi script—a form of the Aramaic alphabet, used to write an Indo-European language of Iran—achieved even greater levels of ambiguity and confusion, and yet was used for the administrative and religious records of the Parthian empire. Interpreting ambiguity was accepted as one of the skills of literacy, and one scholar has remarked of Pahlavi that 'in practice, remarkably, the many ambiguities rarely impede interpretation' (Hale 2004: 764).

In the case of the late Nabataean script, the individual development of a number of letters had produced several with shapes that were more or less indistinguishable from others. Thus, of the original twenty-two letters of the Phoenico-Aramaic alphabet, one, samekh, was seldom used since it represented a sound, [s], which was not in the Nabataean or Old Arabic phonemic repertoire (Beeston 1962; Macdonald 2000: 45, fig. 5; Macdonald 2008: 465) while /š/ and /ś/ were represented by a single letter š. Moreover, in certain positions, the forms of: b and n; l and n; y and t; g and ḥ; z and r, and in badly written texts sometimes even f and q, and d and k, were indistinguishable (Fig. 9.4). This made the Nabataean alphabet an unsatisfactory vehicle for expressing the twenty-two consonantal phonemes of the Aramaic language, let alone Arabic's repertoire of twenty-eight.

Nevertheless, suitability is seldom considered when a particular script is used to express a particular language, and so it was with Arabic. From the fourth century AD onwards, the Nabataean form of the Aramaic alphabet was no longer used exclusively to write the Aramaic language. This change can be seen in southern Syria and northern Arabia, and may well have also been happening in southern Mesopotamia at the court of the Lakhmids, an Arab dynasty which had settled there, though as yet we have only hearsay evidence for this.

One sign of change is a graffito in Nabataean Aramaic found near ⁽Ēn ⁽Avdat, in the Negev, in which the author included a possible quotation in Arabic, which he wrote in the Nabataean script.[25] This shows that the conceptual shift which allowed a purely spoken language to be written in a 'borrowed' script, had been made, at an individual level, though it was to be some time before this realization would become widespread.[26] Indeed, so strong was the prestige of the Aramaic language, or so fixed its association with the Nabataean alphabet, that Arabic speakers went on trying to write in Aramaic long after the language was beginning to fade from common memory in the areas around them. Thus, in the third century AD, at Umm al-Jimāl, Jordan, the tombstone of the former tutor of the king of the Arab tribe of Tanūkh was carved in bad Nabataean Aramaic and bad Greek (Littmann 1914: 37–40, No. 41; Littmann *et al.* 1913: 138–9, No. 238[1]), while in Ḥegrā at about the same period, another epitaph was written in the equivalent of franglais, that is, Aramaic helped out with Arabic words, phrases and syntax (Jaussen and Savignac 1909–1922, vol.1: 172–6, No. Nab 17; Healey 2002; Macdonald 2008: 471).

However, in the early fourth century in southern Syria, the Nabataean script was used to write a text completely in the Arabic language: the famous Namārah epitaph of King Marʾ l-qays (see most recently Bordreuil *et al.* 1997; and Macdonald 2008: 469). Yet in North Arabia, a couple of decades later, an epitaph

	Late Nabataean	Early Arabic	Modern Arabic		Late Nabataean	Early Arabic	Modern Arabic
ʾ			ا	z			ز
h			ه	r			ر
w			و				
m			م	ṭ			ط
				ẓ			ظ
b			بـ				
y			يـ	ṣ			ص
t			تـ	ḍ			ض
th			ثـ				
n			نـ	ʿ			ع
l			لـ	gh			غ
g			جـ	f			ف
ḥ			حـ	q			ق
kh			خـ				
				sh			سـ
d			د	ś			شـ
dh			ذ				
k			كـ	s	Not used		

Figure 9.4 Late Nabataean and Early Arabic letter-forms.

also in the late Nabataean script, but this time in good Aramaic, was set up for the wife of the ruler of Ḥegrā (Stiehl 1970), though, on current evidence, this appears to be the swansong of Aramaic in Arabia. We have no more monumental inscriptions in the Aramaic language and the Nabataean script. The Aramaic language probably disappeared from the 'Nabataean heartland' some time in the third century AD, having been replaced by Greek as a written language, and gradually by Arabic as the spoken vernacular.[27] The Namārah epitaph of AD 328, is already in the Arabic language and is the last text in the Nabataean script in Syria until the early sixth century. Then this alphabet reappears in a developed form—as the Arabic script [28]—and, with the rise of Islam a century later, takes on an extraordinary new life.

We have no evidence of how, or even whether, this process took place in Syria and in southern Mesopotamia. However, recent discoveries by Saudi Arabian scholars in the regions of al-Jawf (ancient Dūma) and al-ᶜUlā (ancient Dadan), have illuminated the development. They have discovered a number of graffiti, some dated to the fifth century AD, in scripts which are clearly transitional between what we call 'Late Nabataean' and 'Early Arabic'. Some of these texts use the Aramaic 'talismanic' expressions so common in Nabataean graffiti (šlm 'May he be safe and sound', dkyr 'may he be remembered', etc.), but are otherwise in the Arabic language. These rough graffiti are extremely important for they show us the process of reincarnation of the Nabataean Aramaic alphabet, as a vehicle for a previously unwritten language (Macdonald forthcoming d).

Unlike the systematic transformation of the South Arabian alphabet into the Ethiopic, the reincarnation of the Nabataean script appears to have been messy and haphazard. In its earliest form, the Arabic script was just another example of a language squeezed into the straitjacket of the Phoenico-Aramaic alphabet: twenty-eight phonemes represented by the sixteen or so different letter-forms to which the Nabataean alphabet had by this time been reduced (Fig. 9.4), with no way of showing short vowels, medial [aː], or doubled letters, and only the ambiguous system of matres lectionis to represent [uː], [iː], and final [aː]. If the Pahlavi script was 'one of the most imperfect and ambiguous ever known' (Hosking and Meredith-Owens 1966: 10), the Late Nabataean-Early Arabic script must have been a close second.

Yet, already in the earliest Arabic papyri (AD 643, see Grohmann 1966: pl. 2) dots were being used to distinguish letters with identical forms but different values, and by the eighth century AD, a series of adjustments typical of the South Semitic, rather than the Phoenico-Aramaic, tradition had been made to what was now truly the 'Arabic alphabet'. First, a more-or-less consistent system of diacritical points had been developed at an early stage, which increased the number of letters to the twenty-eight needed to express the consonantal phonemic repertoire of Written Arabic (Revell 1975). Although, at first, these were used sparingly and usually only where there was a danger of serious

ambiguity, they relatively soon became essential elements of the letters to which they were attached. Naturally, in a script used by vast numbers of people from the Atlantic to Indonesia, there were considerable variations in practice, and careless scribes often omitted points at random. Equally, the unpointed angular ('Kufic') form of the script continued to be used for inscriptions, particularly graffiti, long after it had been abandoned on other media.

However, this does not take away from the fact that the Arabic alphabet is the only Near Eastern form of the Phoenico-Aramaic script, to have expanded the number of letters to fit the consonantal phonemic repertoire of the language. On the other hand, it remained typical of the Phoenico-Aramaic tradition in that although unambiguous systems of marking short vowels, no vowel (sukūn), and doubled letters (shadda) were developed, they are only used systematically in the text of the Qurʾān, and, elsewhere, are introduced individually only when a serious ambiguity might arise.[29] For, as with Pahlavi, readers take a perverse pride in the ambiguity of the script, and in the skill required to interpret it— or so it appears to those brought up on the descendants of the Greek alphabet. Nabia Abbott (1939: 41) cites ʿAbdallāh ibn Ṭāhir, governor of Khurāsān, (died AD 844/845) who, 'when presented with a piece of elaborate penmanship exclaimed "How beautiful this would be if there were not so much coriander seed [diacritical dots] scattered over it"', while as late as the seventeenth century, Ḥājī Khalīfah 'advised omitting vowels and diacritical points, especially in addressing persons of consequence and refinement, in regard to whom it would be impolite to suppose that they did not have a perfect knowledge of the written language' (Abbott 1939: 41). Even today, while diacritical points are employed in all careful writing, it would be considered a slur on the reader's intelligence and education to use the signs marking short vowels when writing to an adult.

With the spread of Islam, the Arabic script became (until the twentieth century) one of the most widely used alphabets in the world. By the end of the seventh century AD, the Arabian Peninsula was united under one rule for the first time in its history. In the past, South Semitic alphabets had been widely used to record the many different languages and dialects of Arabia. Now, Arabic, a language which in those days had normally been unwritten, had spread throughout the Peninsula and a reborn and remodelled version of the Phoenico-Aramaic alphabet, was carrying the language, with the Islamic faith, to a wider world. Meanwhile, across the Red Sea, in Ethiopia, the last scion of the South Semitic tradition, reborn as a vocalized alphabet, was flourishing as the vehicle of another language and another faith.

At the conference, Stephen Houston began his paper with the opening line from T. S. Eliot's *East Coker*, 'In my beginning is my end'. It seems appropriate that this tale of alphabetic reincarnation should conclude with the poem's final line: 'In my end is my beginning'.[30]

Notes

1. According to Herodotus (*Histories* V.58), the first Greeks to borrow the alphabet from the Phoenicians 'gave to these characters … the name phoinikēia', i.e. 'Phoenician [letter]s'. Indeed, a Cretan document of c. 500 BC contains a verb poinikázen 'to use phoinikēia' [i.e. letters], to write', and a noun of agent poinikastás '[official] scribe' (Jeffery and Morpurgo-Davies 1970: 132–3, 152–3). The 'Phoenix' of my title—symbol of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, which Herodotus (II.73) and later tradition placed in Arabia—takes its name from a homonymous Greek root.

2. By 'traditional' alphabets, I mean those derived from other alphabets, rather than those—such as Braille or semaphore—whose signs were invented ex nihilo.

3. The Arabian Peninsula is clearly defined on three sides by its coastline, but its northern limits have always been vague (Fig. 9.1). For the sake of brevity, when referring to the 'Arabian Peninsula' here I shall include modern Jordan and southern Syria, which geographically form part of the same land mass and, in antiquity at least, part of a cultural continuum which ran south to north through the western two-thirds of the Peninsula.

4. Phoenician has twenty-two consonants, and only Akkadian, with twenty consonants, appears to have had a smaller repertoire. For a recent description of Phoenician see Hackett (2004).

5. Thus, Hebrew had twenty-three consonants, and so š had to represent [ʃ] and /ś/ (a phoneme whose realization is disputed but which may have been something like [ɬ]). Only more than 1500 years later did the Masoretes (see Revell 1992) create a diacritical dot to distinguish when this letter represented etymological /ś/ and when /š/. Ironically, by this time /ś/ had long since ceased to represent a separate phoneme in Hebrew, having fallen under /s/, which was represented by a different letter (same-kh). For a brief summary see McCarter 2004: 324. Old Aramaic may have had as many as twenty-seven consonantal phonemes. When it was written in the alphabet inherited from Phoenician, z had to represent both [z] and [ð], ṣ had to represent both [s'] and [θ'], q had to represent both [k'] and the phoneme /ḍ/ (which was probably realized as [ɬ'] or [ð']), while š had to represent three consonants: [ʃ], /ś/, and [θ]. See Creason 2004: 396 for a brief description of the phonemes of Old Aramaic.

6. Thus, the Ancient South Arabian written languages (Sabaic, Madhabic, Qatabanic, and Hadramitic) used a maximum of twenty-nine consonants, though in some languages, or at particular stages of a language, some sounds fell together, e.g., /s³/ and /t̲/ in Hadramitic or /s¹/ and /s³/ in late Sabaic. Some of the Ancient North Arabian dialects had twenty-eight consonants (Dadanitic, Safaitic, Hismaic), others fewer (e.g., Taymanitic). Dadanitic, Safaitic, and Hismaic appear to have had a similar consonantal phonemic repertoire to Arabic (Macdonald 2004: 497–502). Taymanitic, however, apparently had no equivalent to Arabic /ẓ/ and the use of the same sign for /ḍ/ and /z/ suggests that [ð] and [z] had fallen together. On the other hand, unlike Arabic and all the other Ancient North Arabian dialects, it appears to have used a letter to represent /s³/, at least in loan names containing [s]. See Macdonald 2004: 499–500.

7. Matres lectionis are letters representing consonants which, in certain circumstances, are also used to represent a long vowel. Dadanitic (see below) is the only South Semitic alphabet to use matres lectionis systematically, and even here the practice is restricted to the final long vowels [a:] and [u:], represented by -h and -w respectively, and the diphthong [ai] represented by y. In the orthography of the South Arabian alphabet (see below) -y and -w are used regularly in certain positions, and sporadically elsewhere, to represent [i:] and [u:] respectively. See the excellent treatment in Stein 2003: 41–7, and the radical suggestions in Robin 2001: 570–7.

8. Since the term 'Ancient North Arabian' describes both a group of alphabets and the dialects they normally expressed, for the sake of clarity I will use the abbreviation 'ANA' to refer to the alphabets and the full title 'Ancient North Arabian' to refer to the dialects.

9. This is used to write Geꜥez, Amharic, and other Semitic languages of Ethiopia. See Gragg 2004: 431–3; and below.

10. 'North Arabian' is a subgroup of Central Semitic: see Macdonald 2000: 29, fig. 1; 2004: 488–93.

11. There were populations which their contemporaries called 'Arabs' in all these areas from at least the fifth century BC onwards, and in Mesopotamia considerably earlier. See Macdonald 2001 and 2003.

12. I have called the texts in which this is so 'Undifferentiated North Arabian'. See Macdonald 2000: 54–7.

13. It is possible that they used them more often than we realise, for if they confined themselves to writing their names, we cannot tell which language they spoke. For some of the very few examples where Arabic speakers appear to have used the Safaitic and Dadanitic scripts, see Macdonald 2000: 51–3 and 2008: 467–8.

14. I have called these scripts 'Taymanitic', 'Dumaitic', and 'Dadanitic' after the oases in which they were used (Fig. 9.3). 'Dadanitic' was formally called 'Dedanite' and 'Lihyanite'. On the new terminology see Macdonald 2000: 33 and for the different letter-forms in these alphabets see Fig 9.2 above.

15. This, at least, is the interpretation of the inscription put forward in Macdonald (1995) and a revised and expanded English version in Macdonald forthcoming b, though it differs from that of the editio princeps (Milik 1971).

16. The various forms of the South Semitic script used by the nomads are known today as 'Safaitic', 'Hismaic', and 'Thamudic'. For more detail see Macdonald 2000: 29, fig. 1, 43–6; 2004: 492.

17. There are several examples of a single drawing being claimed by two different people, e.g. Winnett and Harding 1978, nos 767/768, 3502/3503, and possibly Oxtoby 1968, nos 425/426, though the latter are known only from a copy and a second drawing may have been missed. In one case, from al-ꜥĪsāwī in southern Syria, a Safaitic inscription lays claim to what is clearly a prehistoric drawing.

18. Note, however, that this dating is based simply on the facts that the last datable inscriptions are from the mid-third century AD and that there is no reference in any

of the graffiti to the existence of Christianity. This is not a satisfactory basis for a terminus ad quem, but it is all we have.

19. In Macdonald 2005: 49–50, I have defined what I mean by the terms used here, as follows: 'I would define a literate society as one in which reading and writing have become essential to its functioning, either throughout the society (as in the modern West) or in certain vital aspects, such as the bureaucracy, economic and commercial activities, or religious life'. 'I would regard a non-literate … society as one in which literacy is not essential to any of its activities, and memory and oral communication perform the functions which reading and writing have within a literate society. Pre-historic and—at least until very recently—most nomadic societies were of this sort'. 'When large sections of the population of a literate society cannot read and/or write, they inhabit [a non-literate] enclave within that literate society, since their daily lives are usually touched by reading and writing only when they come into contact with the authorities, or when, in relatively rare cases, they need to use long-distance written communication'.

20. For the monumental script see Robin 2001: 512 and references there for the earliest examples. For the latest Sabaic inscription, see Robin 1991: 19, 134. Thirty-six documents on sticks in the minuscule script have recently been radiocarbon dated. The earliest has a range between 1055 and 901 BC, and the most recent in the late fourth century AD. See Drewes *et al.* forthcoming. However, in another collection, there are a number of sticks dated on internal evidence to the fifth and early sixth centuries AD. See Stein forthcoming. Two sticks inscribed in the Arabic script have been published, but their authenticity has been questioned (see Robin 2001: 536–7).

21. However, knowledge of the script appears to have lingered on for several centuries. Al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī, a Yemeni antiquary of the tenth century AD, still knew the values of the Sabaic letters even though he could not understand the language (Robin 1991: 134). There are also two graffiti by men whose names and whose fathers' names are Islamic, both of which begin with an Arabic verb (Robin 1976: 188–92; 1991: 134). The texts are clearly not by habitual users of the South Arabian script, nor are they transcriptions of spoken Arabic into the South Arabian alphabet. Instead, they are calques of Written Arabic, copying its orthographic conventions in every detail save one, and totally ignoring those of the South Arabian script. Is it possible that they are not ancient, but were perhaps produced by modern Yemeni villagers who had learnt the South Arabian alphabet, but not its orthographic conventions? I have myself come across such people in relatively remote parts of Yemen.

22. Thus, for instance, those letters representing [θ] and [ɣ] were eliminated; s³ which represented [s] in the South Arabian alphabet, was re-assigned to represent emphatic p [p̣]; and the letter *pa* was invented to represent [pˢ].

23. These points could represent vowels, accents, the pronunciation of certain allophones, doubled letters, guides for chanting, etc. See, for instance, Revell (1992) for Hebrew, and Segal (1953) for Syriac. In Hebrew, even the dot distinguishing /š/ from /ś/ (see n.5, above) is not considered part of the letter and, in most texts, is omitted along with the other diacritical marks.

24. In Syriac the letters d and r were regularly distinguished by a diacritical dot. In Palmyrene, the use of the distinguishing dot is sporadic, but consistent (dot over r and under d, as in Syriac). In Nabataean, it is sporadic. Ironically, the dot over the d is mainly used in later inscriptions in which the shapes of the two letters have anyway grown distinct.

25. The inscription is alas undated (the dating offered in the editio princeps [Negev *et al.* 1986: 60] is extremely speculative). The exact reading and interpretation of the Arabic part of the text are disputed, see Lacerenza (2000) for most of the bibliography.

26. If one is not used to writing one's spoken language, it requires something of a 'mental leap' to realize that it is possible to do so, and, until that change in attitude becomes habitual and widespread, it seems more 'natural' to use a language that is normally written. Thus, many Arabs today will say that it is 'impossible' to write colloquial Arabic and that only the literary language (which has to be learnt) can be written. Similarly, most speakers of Modern South Arabian languages (Jibbāli, Mahri, Soqoṭri, etc.) do not consider transcribing them in the Arabic script, but instead, if they need to record something or communicate in writing, will do so in Arabic (if necessary through a scribe) even if the recipient is a speaker of the same Modern South Arabian language.

27. If, indeed, Aramaic had ever been the principal spoken language in this region. Note that, in AD 374–376, Epiphanius of Eleutheropolis records that the people of Petra, and Elusa in the Negev, sang hymns in the Arabic language (Panarion 51.22.11), while in the sixth-century Greek papyri recently discovered at Petra there are large numbers of Arabic toponyms and names of buildings (Daniel 2001).

28. See the Zebed inscription (Grohmann 1971: pl. II; Gruendler 1993: 13–14; Robin 2006: 336–8), the Jabal Usays graffito (most recently Robin and Gorea 2002), and the Harrān inscription (Gruendler 1993: 14; Robin 2006: 332–6).

29. This is no doubt a major reason why during the twentieth century such languages as Turkish, Bahasa Indonesian, and Malay abandoned the Arabic script in favour of the Roman. It is interesting to note that in 1981 a fully vocalized text of the great medieval Arabic–Arabic dictionary, Lisān al-ᶜarab, was published in Beirut, possibly a sign of decreasing tolerance of traditional adherence to the somewhat hermetic principles of the Phoenico-Aramaic script. In the thirteenth century AD, Bar Hebraeus had already bewailed the lot of those who had to read the Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic alphabets (all descendants of the Phoenico-Aramaic script) in comparison to 'those who have perfect alphabets (… for example, Greek, Latin, Coptic, or Armenian). Without the labour of artificial devices and (simply by looking at) their letters they can fly unburdened over passages they have never known (before), that are not marked by symbols, and that they have never previously heard' (translation from Segal 1953: 8).

30. Eliot was quoting Mary, Queen of Scots (1542–1587), who is said to have embroidered the motto 'En ma fin gît mon commencement' together with an emblem of her mother, Marie de Guise.

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