

The development of arabic scripts

Countries



1. Pre - Islamic Era Arabic script is probably one of the oldest in the world, having been widely spread across cultures as this was the language used to spread Islam in major territories. Its influence can be seen in various languages which adopted Arabic script to develop their own way of recording, like Persian, Pashto, Urdu and more. But Arab scripts have evolved with major historical events of these nations (AncientScripts. com). Various accounts of the history of Arabia, the ' island of the Arabs', give the impression that Arabic scripts started to take form at the height of Islamization or during the time of Prophet Mohammed.

It is said to have originated from the fourth century, CE but there is evidence - an ancient document - that shows Arabic script was already a medium for recording even as early as 512 CE. Long before the Prophet Mohammed was born (some authors say even 700 years before Mohammed), the Arabs already had established a form of written language which originally was used by the Nabateans who once inhabited a territory which is now the kingdom of Jordan. This was called the Nabatean script, which evolved from the Aramaic language.

The Nabataean script was an off - shoot of the Aramaic alphabet which developed in the first century CE on the Sinai Peninsula and in North Arabia. It differs conspicuously from other Aramaic varieties by making extensive use of ligatures. Stone inscriptions in the Nabataean script are found from Petra, the capital of the Nabataean Kingdom (c. 150 CE to 100 CE), to Damascus and Medina. The script is not attested in manuscripts, although its cursive character with letters frequently joined together indicates common use.

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The language of the inscriptions is Nabataean, a close cognate of Aramaic - other authors claim it s Aramaic and that the Nabataeans had dual language styles for communication: written in Aramaic, verbal in Arabic. Spread over a wide area, the script exhibits considerable variation with highly diverse letter shapes. Its significance for the history of writing lies in its being the immediate forebear of the Arabic script. Certain features of the Arabic character, such as the existence of separate final forms for certain letters, are already foreshadowed in Nabataean writing.

Its transformation into the Arabic script took place in the fourth and fifth centuries CE (Calmous 350). In the North of the Syrian Desert, the Arabs were involved in world politics very much earlier. Even under the Assyrian king Tiglath - Pileser III (745 - 728BC), there was an Arabi kingdom there with its capital in the Jawf, which was ruled by queens and remained one of the vassal states of Assyria until the time of Essarhaddon (689 - 669 BC). The Babylonian King Nabunaid (556 - 539 BC) had his residence for some time in the oasis of Tayma, which was the base of his expeditions against the west.

An Aramaic inscription from the Persian era found there indicates the organization of the city cult, with its priests and temple gods. Then as early as the period of the last Achaemenians, the Nabataean state sprang up (in a territory of modern day Jordan). This state controlled the caravan trade from South Africa to Medina and remained significantly independent since Alexander the Great's plan of conquering Arabia by sea from east and west simultaneously was not resumed by his successors.

At first, Petra's commerce was drawn to Bostra, where caravans then proceeded to Chalcis, below Lebanon and Emesa, Edessa, and Hatra toward the north and east. The Nabataeans adopted the titles of their officials and military leaders from neighboring Hellenistic states. The Nabataean capital was Petra, a mountain fortress lying about halfway between the Dead Sea and the tip of the Arabian gulf (Brockelman 6).

Numerous inscriptions and ruins found in the rock-cut tombs bear witness to the flourishing civilization of the Nabataeans but in these inscriptions, Aramaic was used for it was then the official language dating as far back as the time of the Achaemenians. There are also accounts of other historians that Arabic was the spoken language of the Nabataeans but they write using Aramaic. Initially, they were considered by the Romans as allies until the time of Trajan but due to doubts over their ambiguity during the Jewish insurrection under Titus, the Nabataean Kingdom was absorbed as Provincia Arabia in 106 BC.

The civilized areas - or the major cities where trades occur - were marked off from the desert by a chain of fortifications which were far from being strong as the Limes on the Rhine and on the Danube frontier (Brockelman 6). But in another Arab state, Palmyra, the Nabataeans found a more fortunate heir. In the wars between Rome and the Parthians, Palmyra was prudently neutral and by the time of Augustus, was able to extend its trade connections to Rome, Dacia, Gaul and Spain. The Severian Dynasty, also half-Semitic, showed favor on Palmyra.

From 260 onwards King Odenat extended his rule over the entire Syria and was even acknowledged by the weak Roman Emperor, Gallienus, as co-

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emperor for the Orient. After his death in 268, his wife Zenobia maintained his power for a time but Aurelianus destroyed Palmyra in 273. This tragedy would be retold through generations even until the first centuries of Islam. (Brockelmann 7). Palmyra represented the last stance of Arab independence pre - Islam and its fall marked a loss of Arab independence.

No other Arab state in the north remained free after this and they were used as vassals by the Romans and Byzantines to ward off incursions of the nomads (Bedouins, or Arabs) into the settled regions. This is probably why the Nabataeans retained their scripts even under Roman rule - because they continued with their trades and were also vassals to ward off their own kind from coming into major cities of commerce (Brockelmann 7). In the 6th century, however, the Ghassanid dynasty ruled at Damascus, east of the Jordan.

He was designated by Justinian in 529 as patricius and phylarch with supreme authority over all the Arabs in the northern Syria. But this power again dissolved into fragmentary principalities after his death and when they won over the Persians, the Roman Emperor let their officials rule until a Muslim onslaught brought another Ghassanid ruler of the Syrian Arabs (Brockelmann 8). Before and during these periods, the Arabs had been exposed to Christianity (Yah-weh / Judaism) at one time or another.

First, from the Roman Empire Christianity exercising great power over them, down to the Lakhmid Dynasty in Hirah who once served the Persians and had finally gone to the Christian faith of their urban subjects, even the Bedouins in the north were in intimate contact with the indigenous Aramean population, who had long since been swallowed up by Christianity. Inner

Arabia also due to their trading cities of the Hijaz must have also been permeated by a knowledge of Christian teachings and customs, however superficial, as a result of the steady traffic with related tribes in the north.

The anchorites, whose cells must have spread from Palestine and Sinai Peninsula far into the desert, no doubt also made a great many contributions. In addition, the desert was an asylum from some sects persecuted by the established church, and precisely these may have spread their doctrines with more success than the Orthodox Church. During these times, however, the Aramaic language still remained the official and principal administrative language.

Thus, most of the inscriptions on the Petra were in Aramaic but there have been evidence showing that the Nabataeans before used their own language for their local transactions and in oral exchange, but retained Aramaic for recording due to its value in trading with other countries. Other authors propose that some Arab nations or states were actually oral groups; meaning, they hand down their stories by telling and re - telling it and still could keep it fresh in their memories but there are also groups who were visual, or those which could not keep a mental record of events thus, keep records in tablet form.

Nomads, for instance, or Bedouins, often recite poetry in their gatherings inside their tents wherever they are in the dessert. But those engaged in trades, in the major cities, often would chose to write to keep a record of their transactions. Many believe that the ancient Arabs' exposure to Christians / those practicing Judaism probably justifies the influence or traces

of Sumerian, Greek, Akkadian or Aramaic system to an otherwise Semitic heritage in the Arabic scripts or written as well as spoken languages.

But others argue that though there appear some points for seeming similarities, these actually represent the observed or practiced systems used by different countries at the time. While some authors attribute the variations to assimilation, others believe the language and therefore, the scripts, evolved following events in Arab history. But in the case of the Nabataeans from the former territory now called Jordan, they were able to keep both, Arab language and Aramaic scripts.

This is perhaps because all Arabs, including the Nabataeans who were under Roman rule for many years, were used as vassals against their own Arab brothers. Thus they kept their language to communicate with each other, and for trading purposes, maintained Aramaic. The duality could perhaps be due to the fact that two somewhat differing entities formed their society then: the urban people and the nomads (whom they had to ward off from the center of civilization, as was their task as vassals for the Roman Empire).

The former relied so much on writing for keeping records, while the latter, used word of mouth to communicate information, even recite poetry. Other authors though, believe that the Aramaic inscriptions on the Petra were in fact the written or Arabic script at the time. Prior to Mohammed's birth, some Arabs were Christians, others primitive in their exercise of faith, as was their political life. Like they believed that their surroundings had forces superior to those of man.

These forces were believed to be like the human soul but with dangerous powers that could turn them into demons. They, Semites, regarded trees, stones, caves, springs and large stones are inhabited by spirits. The Black Stone of Islam in a corner of the KaBah, Mecca, in Petra and other places in Arabia stones were venerated also. Every tribe has its own god but also recognized the power of other tribal gods in their own sphere. Individual clans sometimes named themselves after other gods than those of the tribe, and the same divinity was worshipped by various tribes.

The gods had fixed abodes, after the tribe has departed, they enjoyed the worship of its successors; the tribes returned once or twice a year to worship (Brockelmann 9). Contrary to claims of the Jews and Christians, the Arabs already did believe in a God, creator of the world, in addition to the gods and goddesses - even before the birth of Islam. 2. The Prophet Mohammed The Prophet Mohammed, ergo, the birth of Islam has also brought about changes in the Arabic scripts. He has touched a cord in Arab history and left an influence that would govern every aspect of Arabian nations long after he had gone.

The Arab ruling group began to identify its new order with a revelation by God to Mohammed, then a citizen of Mecca, in the form of a Holy Book, the Qur'an. This was a revelation which completed those given to earlier prophets or messengers of God and created a new religion, Islam, distinct and separate from Judaism and Christianity (Hourani 15). The most obscure part of his life was the early one. It is said he was born in Mecca, a town in Western Arabia, near or in the year 570. His family belonged to the tribe of Quraysh, although not to its powerful part.

This tribe was composed of traders who had contacts with the pastoral tribes around Mecca, relations with Syria and south - western Arabia. He worked for - and later married - a widow and managed her business for her. One day he received a message from an 'angel, seen in the form of a man on the horizon' who called him to become a messenger of God. Affirmed by his wife, he then began relaying messages which he believed were revealed to him by an angel of God: that the world would end, that God would judge all men and the pains of Hell and delights of Heaven were vividly described.

Gradually he had a following, including young members of the influential families of their tribe, Quraysh, members of minor families and clients of other tribes who had placed themselves under the protection of Quraysh, and some craftsmen and slaves. As his teachings developed, its difference from the teachings of the time became apparent and placed him more explicitly in the line of prophets of the Jews and Christian tradition (Hourani 1991). Mohammed demanded of his followers' profession of belief in the One God and the surrender to God's will, islam, after which his religion took its name.

Probably very early he also levied a poor - tax for the maintenance of needy members of the community but it was only later in Medina that it assumed greater significance. The chief duty of the faithful, by virtue of which they professed membership in the community, was praying at first twice, then three times, and only later five times a day. Mohammed's teachings were not accepted by some of the Arabs, in fact, he and his followers were locked up in a ravine. When his wife and uncle died, he had to

move to Mecca after his brother, a strong opponent of his religion, took his uncle's place.

But he was not accepted there as well and driven away by stoning that he never returned to the place until he received assurance from a relative that he will be protected. Within his lifetime, Mohammed started his mission of religious and political unification of Arabia. He abolished the foothold of paganism in Mecca and later in all Arab states. Then after his death, he was succeeded by his father -in - law and started the caliphate. The caliphate succeeded in subduing and conquering neighboring places and spread Islam with it.

There were oppositions to it, like people willing to follow the religion or Allah's will but not pay taxes. In the long run, however, they were either driven by force, fear or respect for the Allah so that the religion flourished in almost all of Asia, the Mediterranean as well as some parts of Europe (Hourani 6). It was after the conquest of Mesopotamia that a school for the study of Islam and its development was built in the city of Kufa. Kufa is the place where the kufic script was developed / originated, hence the name.

Due to variations in the languages of peoples - converts - under Islamic rule, they felt the need to provide uniformity of religious concepts and practices so that scholars created some form of a dictionary which was later discarded. But that, to some analysts, was actually the first helpful step in Arab history for establishing the common literary standard of Islamic scholars (Brockelmann 15) The extent to which the intellectual life of the epoch was still dominated by Arabic and by the great past of the Arabs is also attested

to by the two major focus of interest of the educated world: philology and history.

The former had risen in connection with the Qur'an. It was necessary that the numerous new converts, born in communities of different speech, develop and perfect an understanding of the divine word and its proper application in effective prayer. It was just an urgent need to enable them to achieve a complete mastery of the nuances of Arabic and its excessively rich vocabulary (Brockelmann 119). It was in the city of Kufa and Basra where classes on history and literature were conducted.

Kufa was also chosen as the major place for studying Islam and mastering the Qur'an. Due to the various languages of the newly converted Muslims, the kufic script was developed mainly as the medium to copy Qur'an and to create a vast collection of commentaries on the Qur'anic verses. This was done in order for converts of different languages to understand one common version of the Qur'an. Angular, which was most likely a product of inscribing on hard surfaces such as wood or stone, kufic soon became the principal script for copying the Qur'an.

For the same reason (having a principal script for copying the Qur'an), the nakshi script, also known as the ' Mecca - Medina' script came about. It is thought to have been developed by Abu Ali Muhammad Ibn Muqlah (died 940) and introduced in Baghdad, once the seat of literature in Arabia. The nakshi is one of the earliest book hands and is more cursive than the angular kufic script. Because of its elegance and legibility, the nakshi script as of the eleventh century gradually superseded kufic as the principal script for writing the Qur'an.

Nakshi has also been widely used for languages other than Arabic, like Persian, Turkish, Malay, Kiswahili, Hausa, and Serbo - Croatian, among others. And from this script, other styles have also developed, the most popular of which are the rika, diwani, and the thuluth (Calmous 351). Another off - shoot of the nakshi script is the nastaliq script, which was first seen in the thirteenth century CE, developed by Mir Ali, a calligrapher from Tabriz. It evolved as a combination of nakshi and taliq, hence the name nastaliq.

While nakshi was primarily used for copying the Qur'an, the nastaliq, on the other hand, was widely used for manuscripts and architectural monuments, particularly in Persia (Calmous 353). With the invasion of Persia came another development in language and scripts. Farsi, actually a combination of Arabic and European languages, was used by the Persians and Arab residents in that area. Other authors claim that Abu Ali Muhammad Ibn Muglah, a vizier in Baghdad, invented the sitta, a canon of six cursive scripts which include the thuluth, nakshi, rihani, muhaqqaq, tauqi and rika.

This was later augmented to include four more scripts, ghubar, tumar, taliq and nastaliq, which came to be used in the whole Islamic world. While these cursive scripts were popular with calligraphers and illuminators, they never replaced the kufic altogether, except for the nakshi - other writers claim it superseded the kufic by the eleventh century. Today, in many religious writings, kufic headings are still used, in combination with the main body of the text written in cursive script (Calmous 66). One cannot study the Arabic scripts without touching on Arabic calligraphy.

Since the Prophet Mohammad stated God's message in his native tongue, Arabic (scholars think he was actually using a combination of Aramaic and Nabataean languages, otherwise now known and indiscriminately described as Arabic), the Qur'an hence was also written in this language. Arabic, has therefore, been revered as God's language and every letter of the Arabic alphabet is regarded as a manifestation of God (Calmous 64). Thus, for many Muslims the Qur'an should not be rendered in any other language.

As the written version of the revelation, it must always be copied in Arabic. Since, in the wake of the Islamic conquest Islam as a religion was carried to regions of many different tongues, written Arabic acquired an important function as a unifying bond of the various Islamic peoples. Writing itself came to be regarded as an expression of faith. In this spirit it developed into a religious inspired art with a special status that no other forms of aesthetic expression was able to attain - calligraphy (Calmous 64).

A great variety of materials was used to receive calligraphic writing: stone, glass, ceramics, metalwork, woodwork, carpets and other textiles, as well as parchment paper and other surfaces of manuscript writing. The adaptability of Arabic scripts and their ability to be modified is attributed to the early use of such a variety of surfaces (Calmous 64). Because of its religious significance, great importance is attached to the literal contents of Islamic calligraphy. Yet, sometimes the verbal message is pushed into the background by the decorative function.

As many students of Islamic calligraphy pointed out, there are a great number of inscriptions which defy easy reading. Orthographic mistakes and peculiarities as well as typographic idiosyncrasies render inscriptions on such

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sanctuaries as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (seventh century), the Qutab Minar in Delhi (eleventh century) and the Masjid-i-Shah Mosque in Isfahan (seventeenth century) virtually impossible to decipher. This suggests that the viewer of these works was not always expected to read the text.

In many instances of decorative writing, the symbolic message was conveyed by other means. For instance, an inscription on a tomb or the wall of a mosque would be recognized as a holy phrase, no matter whether it could actually be read or not (Calmous 66). History shows that the development of Arabic scripts, as opposed to Arabic calligraphy, was purely for a functional rather than decorative purpose. However, for many who find it impossible to decipher scripts or calligraphic art in Arabic, they would have to look deeper into the history of Arabic nations, with focus on the history of Islam.

Those who wish to decipher and understand the numerous transitions the Arabic scripts have gone through across the centuries would better grasp, and maybe even be guided by the annals of history. For instance, while others think nakshi has superseded kufic being the principal language or medium of communication or transmitting the Qur'an, it would help them understand better or find out more if such is the fact by assessing the current or be updated with the present print media being used by Islam.

On the other hand, as is occurring amongst Christians all over the world, with all the versions and different languages or Arabic scripts used to print the Qur'an, is there any chance that there may be issues of misinterpretations considering that there is not an exact equivalent of one word across the different scripts or languages? Or is it safe to assume that the later scripts

developed (nakshi, kufic, thuluth) found exactly the same words from Arabic translated to these scripts in exact precision?

It may not be humanly possible to decipher each and every variation of the Qur'an copied in the different scripts like nakshi and kufic to see if precisely the same words have the same meaning in the original Arabic version. But if for the interest of curiosity one should start to do an inquest, maybe it would save him time to reflect on the following observations and then make his own inferences:

First of all, in spite of the variations or the versions of Arabic scripts by which the Qur'an is written, it is amazing how there is only one version of Islam the religion and all things corollary to Allah's orders are the same things every Muslim believes. Comparing the Islam faith with Christianity, there are thousands of types of Christians all over the world - some of which were formed on the basis of their understanding of some verses in the Holy Bible.

Though both the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an have been translated or transliterated or written in different scripts, the uniformity of treatment and application of the religious concepts practiced by Muslims all over the world is simply amazing. It therefore becomes easy to infer that the kufic and nakshi scripts, used in copying Qur'an, may have therefore been religiously developed. And the purpose therefore, of developing such scripts to help other Islamic converts understand it, was achieved.