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THE EARLIEST STAGES OF ARABIC AND ITS LINGUISTIC CLASSIFICATION

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1 Introduction

The first clear attestation of an Arabic word occurs in the Kurkh monolith inscription of the neo-Assyrian monarch, Shalmaneser III (853 BCE). The text lists the names of a coalition of leaders who opposed the expansion of the Assyrians into the Levant. Among rulers such as Adad-'idri of Damascus and Ahab the Israelite, we find ^{m}*Gi-in-di-bu-* ^{kur}*Ar-ba-a-a*, that is, 'Gindibu the Arab' (lit, of the land of Arbāy). The cuneiform sources use the term "Arab" (A-ri-bi) to describe peoples living from Mesopotamia in the east to the Anti-Lebanon mountains in the west, and from northwest Arabia to the Sinai in the south (Eph'al 1982). Later Greek and Persian sources record the presence of Arabs across the Fertile Crescent and North Arabia as well, although it not always possible to determine what individual authors meant when they used the term (see the various articles in Macdonald 2009). Only one text in the Arabic language can be dated to this period: a Ancient North Arabian inscription, discovered at Bayir in Jordan, containing a prayer to the gods of the Iron Age kingdoms of Ammon, Moab, and Edom, *Malkom*, *Kemōš*, and *Qaws*, respectively (Hayajneh, Ababneh, and Khraysheh 2015). While the text is undated, the combination of its contents as well as an accompanying Canaanite inscription strongly suggests a mid to late Iron Age II date. Aside from this short prayer, the Arabic of the ancient Near East is known only from a handful of personal and divine names transcribed in other languages (on these fragments, see Macdonald 2008).

Evidence for Arabic becomes more abundant towards the end of the first millenium BCE with the arrival of inscriptions in the Nabataean, Hismaic, and Safaitic scripts. While the Nabataeans used a form of Achaemenid Official Aramaic as a literary language, several features betray an Arabic substratum, most notably in the areas of syntax and personal names. The epigraphy in the Safaitic and Hismaic scripts, which extends from North Arabia to the Ḥawrān, also provides considerable evidence for the earliest stages of Arabic. It is impossible to determine when these writings began but their authors seem to have been especially productive in the Nabataean and Roman periods (1st c. BCE – 4th c. CE), as references to the political events of these centuries are relatively abundant. Nevertheless, the Iron Age inscription from Bayir mentioned earlier could suggest a continuous tradition of writing Arabic in the region throughout the first millenium BCE. A bird's-eye view of the situation places the earliest stages of Arabic in northwest Arabia and the southern Levant.

At some point, Arabic moves south into the Arabian Peninsula. The term *ʾrb* begins to appear in the Sabaic inscriptions of ancient Yemen roughly around the turn of the era. While many scholars have connected *ʾrb* with Qurʾānic *ʔaʕrābun*, which is understood to mean "nomads" by traditional exegetes, there is no internal evidence in the Sabaic inscriptions to support such an equation (Retsö 2003, pp. 536–574). Moreover, there is no evidence as to the language of the *ʾrb*. No texts in the Arabic language have yet appeared in pre-Islamic South Arabia proper, although several inscriptions from the northern frontier, the so-called Haram area, seem to reflect an admixture of another language (Stein 2008), perhaps Arabic but other North Arabian varieties are equally likely. In south-central Arabia, the town of Qaryat al-Fāw has yielded an interesting epitaph exhibiting a mixture of Sabaic and non-Sabaic features. While the text has been traditionally considered an example of Old Arabic, a recent linguistic investigation suggests that it is better interpreted as a transitional dialect between North Arabian and Sabaic, if not an artificial mixed register (Al-Jallad 2014). Another example of Old Arabic was identified in Mulayḥah, but this has recently been shown to be a form of Aramaic (Macdonald 2008). It is, therefore, unclear when Arabic replaced the indigenous languages of the nomads and oasis towns of central and southern Arabia (see Ancient North Arabian in section 2.2) or the epigraphic languages of Ancient Yemen. Regarding the latter, the works of the Arabic grammarians suggest that the Ancient South Arabian languages continued to be spoken and perhaps even written well into the 9th c. CE.

2 Historical background and perspectives: the debate on Arabic's classification

The classification of Arabic has occupied a central position in the efforts of Semiticists to understand the evolution of the Semitic language family. Earlier scholars saw Arabic as more closely connected with the languages situated in the southern half of the Arabian Peninsula and Semitic languages of Ethiopia (Huehnergard and Rubin 2011, p. 260). Together, these languages formed a sub-grouping called "South Semitic". In addition to a perceived geographic proximity, three features common to Classical Arabic and the modern dialects, the Ancient South Arabian languages of pre-Islamic Yemen, the Modern (non-Arabic) South Arabian languages, and Ethio-Semitic were taken as evidence for a common "South Semitic" origin.

1 Plurals formed by pattern replacement rather than simply suffixation (broken plurals), e.g. CA, singular *kalbun* 'dog', plural *kilābun* or singular *ʔilāhun* 'god', plural *ʔālihatun*.
2 The realization of Proto-Semitic *p as [f]: compare CAr *fataḥa* with Hebrew *pātāḥ*, Aramaic *ptaḥ*, and Old Akkadian *patāʾum*.
3 A verbal derivation formed by the insertion of a long vowel between the first and second root consonant, the so-called L-stem (form III in Classical Arabic grammar), *fāʕala*.

As methods of language classification were refined in the 20th century, the sub-grouping of the Semitic languages was gradually revised. Instead of relying on geography and arbitrary similarities, linguists began to focus on *shared morphological innovations* (Hetzron 1974, 1975, 1976). Complex changes in morphology were less likely to be borrowed or arise as the result of coincidence, and so such features could more accurately suggest descent from a com-mon ancestor.

This perspective immediately disqualified two out of the three "South Semitic" features. The broken plurals, it turns out, were not an innovation at all, but rather reflected the preservation of the original Proto-Semitic strategy of pluralization (Huehnergard and Rubin 2011,

pp. 272–273). Likewise, relics of the L-stem could be found across the Semitic languages, indicating that it was not a unique ancestor of the South Semitic languages which developed such a form, but that the other languages simply lost it (Huehnergard and Rubin 2011, p. 273). Finally, the sound change *p* > *f* is so typologically common that it can hardly be used for classification. Its presence in the languages of Arabia and Ethiopia probably points towards areal diffusion rather than a development in a common ancestor (Huehnergard and Rubin 2011, p. 272). Moreover, there is conflicting evidence as to the antiquity of this change within Arabic itself (see section 3.1), and we simply have no evidence as to how this sound was actually pronounced in many of the ancient epigraphic varieties.

From the vista of shared innovations, a key morphological development in the verbal system defines the primary split in the Semitic language family: *East* and *West*. The Proto-Semitic finite verb had two primary forms distinguished by stem ablaut – a perfective: *yaqtul* and an imperfective *yaqattal* (Huehnergard 2008, p. 151). This system is preserved in Akkadian, while West Semitic grammaticalized a construction based on a predicative adjective + pronominal clitic, giving rise to the "suffix conjugation", the perfective *qatala/qataltu* in Arabic (Huehnergard 1987). In most West Semitic languages, the original preterite function of the y*aqtul* stem was marginalized, preserved only in certain constructions (as in Arabic *lam yaqul* 'he did not say').

A sub-section of West Semitic languages exhibit another important innovation in the verbal system: a new imperfective stem. Arabic, the Northwest Semitic languages (Ugaritic, Aramaic, Hebrew, Phoenician, etc.), and the Ancient South Arabian languages replaced the *yaqattal* stem with a new verb form comprising the preterite plus an augment, *-u* in conjugations terminating in a consonant and *-na* in conjugations terminating in a vowel (i.e. *yaqtulu, yaqtuluuna*). The languages that share this complex innovation must have descended from a more recent common ancestor to the exclusion of the Modern South Arabian languages and Ethio-Semitic, which continue the use of the original imperfective **yaqattal*. The *yaqtulu* languages were therefore removed from the "South Semitic" sub-grouping and placed in a new category called "Central Semitic" (on the features of Central Semitic, see Huehnergard 2005). Since the remaining members of South Semitic did not share any morphological innovations, the entire sub-grouping collapsed.

The position of Arabic in the Semitic family based on the principle of shared innovations is shown in Figure 16.1.

2.1 Features unique to Arabic

While Arabic's membership in the Central Semitic category has achieved a virtual consensus, until recently the characteristic features of Arabic itself were never explicitly laid out. In a fundamental paper, Huehnergard (2017) outlined some of the features that distinguish Arabic from the other Semitic languages:

1 The pharyngealized realization of the emphatic consonants: The emphatic consonants in Proto-Semitic were likely glottalized, as in the Modern South Arabian languages and Ethio-Semitic (Kogan 2011).
2 The merger of Proto-Semitic *s¹ [s] and *s³ [t͡s] to [s]: Proto-Semitic had three voiceless 'sibilants': *s¹, an alveolar or apical voiceless sibilant [s], which remains [s] in Classical Arabic; *s², a voiceless lateral fricative [ɬ], which becomes [ʃ] or [ç] in Classical Arabic; and *s³, a voiceless alveolar affricate [t͡s], which also becomes [s] in Arabic, merging with *s¹.

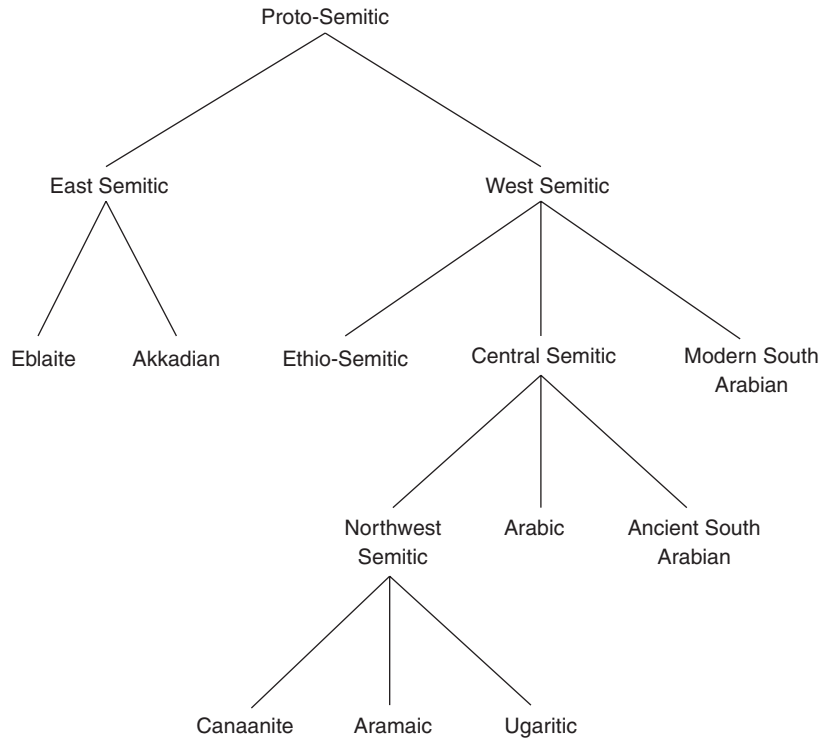

Figure 16.1 Classification of the Semitic Languages

3 The loss of the long form of the 1st person independent pronoun, *ʔanāku*: Proto-Semitic had two forms of the 1st singular pronoun, *ʔanā* and *ʔanāku*, the latter reflected in Hebrew *ʔanôkî*, Akkadian *anāku*, and Ancient South Arabian *ʾnk*. No trace of this pronoun survives in Arabic, which suggests that it was lost at the Proto-Arabic stage.

4 The feminine singular demonstrative element, *t-*, as in Classical Arabic *tā*, *hātā, ʔallatī*, and Old Arabic *ty* /tī/.

5 The replacement of mimation with nunation: In Proto-Semitic, nouns that were not in the construct state terminated in *-n(a)* in the dual and masculine sound plurals and in *-m* everywhere else. Arabic leveled the *-n* ending, producing what the Arabic grammarians called *tanwīn*, *nunation*.

6. Leveling of the *-at* reflex of the feminine ending: Proto-Semitic had two allomorphs of the feminine ending, *-t* and *-at*. Arabic levelled the *-at* ending to all situations, compare Arabic *qātil-atun* to Hebrew *qôṭēlēt* < *qōṭil-t* < *qāṭilt ‘killing’. Relics are preserved in isolated nouns, such as *bintun* ‘girl’ and *ʔuḫtun* ‘daughter’.

7 The 3rd feminine plural termination *-na* on the suffix conjugation: This development is the result of leveling with the prefix conjugation, *yaqtulna*. The same feature is found in Qatabanic and Hadramitic (Ancient South Arabian; see Stein 2011, p. 1060), which is best explained as a parallel development, as these languages are attested much earlier than the period in which we can posit contact with Arabic.

8 The *mafʕūl* pattern as a paradigmatic passive: Proto-Central Semitic seems to have had two forms of the G-stem passive, *qatūl* and *qatīl*, while the nominal stem *maqtūl* occurred in isolated forms. While adjectives often with a passive/stative sense of the former two remain in Arabic (*qatīlun*, *kabīrun*), the productive means by which to form a passive participle from the G-stem (form I) is the pattern *maqtūl*.

9 The absence of a paradigmatic infinitive. Huehnergard suggested that Proto-Semitic had a paradigmatic infinitive of the G-stem (form I) in the pattern *qatāl*. The loss of this feature and the variety of verbal noun patterns in Arabic would then be interpreted as an innovation (but see section 3.2).

10 The vowel melody *u~i* in the passive of the suffix conjugation. Internal passives exist in other Semitic languages, but their vocalic pattern differs. Huehnergard reconstructs the pattern *quttal* for Northwest Semitic.

11 The grammaticalization of the particle *qad* as a perfective morpheme, as in *qad faʕala* 'he had done'.

12 The preposition *fī*, derived from the word "mouth".

13 The loss of the anaphoric or remote demonstrative use of the 3rd person pronouns. The 3rd person pronouns were proper demonstratives in Proto-Semitic and continued as such in most of the daughter languages, e.g. Hebrew *has-seper hā-hû* 'that book'; Dadanitic *w l-h hʔ* 'and that belongs to him' (Farès-Drappeau 2005, p. 66); Akkadian *šarrum šū* 'that king'. No such function is attested in Arabic.

14 The presence of nunation on nominal heads of indefinite asyndetic relative clauses: As Pat-El has shown recently (2014), Arabic exhibits an innovation in its morphosyntax where nunation may occur on the head of asyndetic relative clauses. Other Semitic languages use the construct form of a noun in this syntactic position.

While not all of these developments carry the same weight for linguistic diagnosis, they can with some confidence be reconstructed to the Proto-Arabic stage. The exception is perhaps Feature 1, where the evidence is ambiguous in Old Arabic, and Feature 9, where it has been recently argued that the *Maṣdar* system of Arabic is in fact original and would therefore reflect an archaism rather than an innovation (Strich 2013). This view is supported by the presence and use of the infinitives in Old Arabic, but the vocalic patterns are not always clear.

To these innovations identified by Huehnergard, we may add the following:

15 The subjunctive ending in *-a*: While Hebrew attests a verbal form ending in *â* and an *-a* termination is found in Amarna Canaanite and Ugaritic, verbs with this termination do not function as a paradigmatic subjunctive. Therefore, Huehnergard suggests that the subjunctive in *-a* could be characteristic of Arabic, although he did not place it on the primary list of innovations.

16 The negative *mā*: Huehnergard originally excluded the use of *mā* as a negator from the list of Arabic innovations because it occasionally occurs in Northwest Semitic, e.g. Hebrew *ma-bbə-yādî rāʕâ* 'what evil is in my hand' (i.e. there is no evil in my hand) (1 Sam. 26:18). However, the negative meaning is clearly rhetorical in all of the non-Arabic attestations. The innovation in Arabic is then in the grammaticalization of this rhetorical device into a proper negative adverb.

17 Other prepositions and adverbs that are typical of Arabic may be added to *fī*; these are **ʕan* ablative, **ʕinda* locative, **ḥatta*y 'until', and **ʿkd*y (vocalization unclear) 'thereafter' (found in Old Arabic only).

18 Arabic uniquely uses the particle *ʔan(na) as a complementizer and subordinator, e.g. ʔarāda ʔan yaḏhaba ‘he wanted to go’.

19 The independent object pronoun base *(i*y*)*yā*: despite attempts to connect Arabic *iyyā* with the Northwest Semitic object markers, it is clear that the form is a unique development in Arabic, and is probably related to the vocative marker *yā* used as a topicalizer (Wilmsen 2013). Safaitic attests the form simply as *y*, which may suggest that the Classical Arabic form *ʔiyyā* comprises the presentative *ʔin* and *yā*, with assimilation of the *n*.

2.2 Arabic and ancient North Arabian inscriptions

The relationship between Arabic and the languages attested in the Ancient North Arabian (ANA) inscriptions has been the subject of some debate among scholars (Macdonald 2000). The most notable difference between many of these texts and Classical Arabic is the shape of the definite article, *h-* in most of the ANA inscriptions and *ʔal* in Arabic. Based on this feature, some scholars (Beeston 1981; Muller 1982) have argued for the bifurcation of the languages of Central and North Arabia into “Arabic” and ANA. Knauf (2010) objected to this division and instead argued that the ANA inscriptions were all to be considered an ancient form of Arabic. His argument was based on the presence of broken plurals, a prefixed article, and the merger of *s¹ and *s³. Following from our discussion of classification, both the broken plurals and article are of little value to determine genetic affiliation. While the *s¹ and *s³ merger did occur in Proto-Arabic, it is after all a sound change and could have been spread areally in Central and North Arabia. Moreover, this sound change did not occur in all ANA corpora.

Al-Jallad (2014, 2015, 2017, forthcoming) argues that the linguistic unity of ANA should be demonstrated by the identification of shared innovations, and not assumed. This approach fragmented the ANA corpus into several independent branches, in turn indicating that even North and Central Arabia were home to considerable linguistic diversity in the pre-Islamic period.

2.2.1 Taymanitic

Taymanitic refers to a form of the South Semitic script used at the oasis town of Taymāʾ in modern northern Saudi Arabia (Macdonald 2004, p. 490) and the language it expresses. These inscriptions do not exhibit any of the aforementioned Arabic innovations, but instead exhibit an interesting isogloss typical of the Northwest Semitic languages, the change of *w* to *y* in word initial position: *yrḫ* for *warḫum ‘month, moon’ and *ydʕ* for *wadaʕa ‘to know’. Other sound changes include the merger of *z and *ḏ, *s³ and *ṯ, and of *ṣ and *ẓ (Kootstra 2016). In general, the texts are too short to provide a full linguistic assessment, but these few features remain significant and preclude this language as being an early ancestor of Arabic.

2.2.2 Dadanitic

This term refers to the script and language of the oasis of Dadān in Northwest Arabia. The language of these inscriptions exhibits a few features that seem to have been lost at the Proto-Arabic stage. It retains the anaphoric use of the 3rd person pronoun, *hʔ*; it does not exhibit the innovative form *ḥattay (= Classical Arabic ḥattā), but instead preserves *ʕdky*, probably *[ʕadkay], and does not level the *-at* ending, e.g. *mrʔh* */marʔah/ < **marʔat* ‘woman’ vs. *qrt* */qarīt/ ‘town’, ‘settlement’ compare with Arabic *qaryatun*. Moreover, some inscriptions have

a C-stem (form IV) with an *h-* prefix rather than an *ʔ-* (i.e. hafʕala instead of ʔafʕala), while Proto-Arabic seems to have undergone the change *h* > *ʔ* in this verb form. Variation is also reflected in the definite articles, where both *h(n)* and *ʔ(l)* are attested in the corpus. Other interesting features include the special dissimilation of *t̲ to /t/ in the word 'three', *t̲lt* instead of *t̲lt̲* and the dual pronoun *hmy* *[humay]. The grammar of Dadanitic is still poorly understood, and while several of the aforementioned features exclude its belonging to the Arabic category, more work is required to establish its correct position in the Semitic family (see Macdonald 2004 for further discussion on some of these features).

2.2.3 Thamudic

Thamudic is a conventional term used to cover all of the unclassifiable inscriptional material from the Arabian Peninsula and has nothing to do with the social group known as "Thamūd" from cuneiform, Greek, and later Arabic sources (Macdonald and King 2000). Most of these inscriptions are short and rather uninformative from a linguistic point of view. Nevertheless, the significant challenges they pose for decipherment can only speak to their remote linguistic character. Judgement must be withheld until the entire corpus can be subjected to a thorough linguistic study. At the present moment, scholars divide the Thamudic inscriptions into four general categories according to the shapes of the glyphs.

2.2.3.1 THAMUDIC B

The Thamudic B inscriptions are concentrated in Northwest and Central Arabia, but can be occasionally found in Syria, Egypt, and Yemen. A single Thamudic B text mentions the king of Babylon, which suggests that it was composed before the fall of the kingdom in the middle of the 6th c. BCE, but we have no information as to when these inscriptions begin or end. Most texts consist of short prayers, the meanings of which are still poorly understood, as illustrated by the sometimes bizarre translations given: e.g. *b-ʔlh ʔbtr gzzt nm ḫlṭt* 'by (the power of) *ʔlh ʔbtr* (I) sheared off (the wool of sheep)' (Hayajneh 2011, p. 770). A few linguistic facts, however, can be gleaned from the texts we do understand. The suffix morpheme of the prefix conjugation in the first person is *-t*, as in Arabic and Northwest Semitic, as opposed to the *-k* of Ancient South Arabian and Ethiopic, e.g. *h rḏw b-k ʔn rfʔt* 'O Rḏw, through you I am healed' (Hayajneh 2011, p. 770). The dative preposition is *nm*, which appears to be an assimilated form of an original **lima* cf. Taymanitic *lm*, Hebrew *ləmō*. The consonant /n/ often assimilates to a following contiguous consonant, *ʔt̲t* from earlier *ʾVnt̲at and *ʔt* from earlier *[ʔanta]. Imperatives are often augmented by the energic suffix, *-n*.

2.2.3.2 THAMUDIC C

The Thamudic C inscriptions are concentrated in the Najd, but can be found elsewhere across western Arabia as well. None of these inscriptions contains information that allows us to date them. These texts consist of short statements, usually containing the word *wdd*, the meaning of which is uncertain (Tsafrir 1996). One of the most common formulae is *wdd* followed by *f* and what appear to be personal names. The personal pronoun *ʔn* */ʔanā/ is attested, as well as two terms which appear to be demonstrative pronouns, *zn* */zin/ and *zt* */zāt/, masculine and feminine, respectively. If this identification is correct, then it would appear that the phonemes *ḏ* and *z* have merged to *z*, as in Taymanitic. Other features include the occassional attestation

of mimation on personal names and one attestation of the 3ms suffix pronoun as *-s*[1], similar to the non-Sabaic Ancient South Arabian languages (Al-Jallad forthcoming).

2.2.3.3 THAMUDIC D

These inscriptions are concentrated in northwest Arabia, and one occurs alongside a Nabataean tomb inscription dated to the year 267 CE. The only thing of linguistic substance in these inscriptions is the demonstrative *zn*, which like in Thamudic C, could indicate that the sound change *ḏ* > *z* had operated. The definite article has not yet been attested in this corpus.

2.2.3.4 THAMUDIC F

Thamudic F (or Himaitic, or Southern Thamudic, see Ryckmans 1956 and Robin and Gorea 2016) refers to the non-South Arabian inscriptions from the site of Ḥimà, near Naǧrān. The texts consist primarily of personal names and the verb *wqr* 'to carve'. Some of the theophoric names attest a variety of definite article forms, *hl, ʔl, h, hn, h,* and *ʔ,* and the Ancient South Arabian suffix *-n*. Some of the personal names are also marked with mimation.

2.2.3.5 HISMAIC AND SAFAITIC

Hismaic and Safaitic are the modern names of two scripts that were used across Jordan and southern Syria. In so far as one can see, all of the innovations typical of Arabic are attested in the inscriptions of these corpora (Al-Jallad forthcoming). Most of these are attested in the Safaitic corpus (Al-Jallad 2015), but this fact probably has to do with the fact that the Safaitic inscriptions are generally longer and contain more linguistic information than the Hismaic texts. Nevertheless, two long texts composed in the Hismaic script from central Jordan attest a language that is unambiguously Arabic (Graf and Zwettler 2004).

2.2.4 Old Arabic

The linguistic history of Arabic has been primarily told by modern Arabic dialectologists and Classical Arabic philologists. For this reason perhaps, the pre-Islamic stages of the language have been largely neglected. The strong bias towards the language of the Arabic grammatical tradition placed the developmental timeline of Arabic between two poles: "Old Arabic" as defined by the literary works of the Arab grammarians and the modern spoken forms of the language (see for example Owens 2006; El-Sharkawi 2014).

The term "Old Arabic" is used differently by epigraphists who work with material from the pre-Islamic period, and this is the sense which I shall adopt in this chapter. Old Arabic does not refer to a homogeneous linguistic entity but instead to the entire corpus of inscriptions produced before the Islamic Conquests (Macdonald 2008). The focus on documentary evidence ensures that the material included in this category was not edited by later scribes/transmitters, who could have been influenced by the Arabic grammatical tradition and the standard administrative language. As such, they provide our clearest and most honest view of Arabic's early history.

2.3 Sources for Old Arabic

Our knowledge of Old Arabic derives from the sources discussed in this section.

2.3.1 Inscriptions in the Hismaic and Safaitic scripts

The number of texts composed in both of these scripts nears 50,000 specimens and, as such, they both provide us with a rather detailed view of Old Arabic. Since these inscriptions span a considerable geographic distance and an unknown chronological depth (but perhaps between the 2nd c. BCE and the 4th c. CE), one naturally encounters a good degree of linguistic variation. The true extent of this variation is masked by the purely consonantal nature of the writing system and the brief and formulaic style of the texts. For the grammar of the Old Arabic of the Safaitic inscriptions, see Al-Jallad (2015) and for Hismaic, Al-Jallad (in preparation).

2.3.2 In the Dadanitic script

A single text, JSLih 384, composed in the Dadanitic script (see Macdonald 2008 for bibliography and discussion), from northwest Arabia, provides our only non-Nabataean example of Old Arabic from the Higāz.

2.3.3 In the Nabataean script

Only two texts composed fully in Arabic have been discovered in the Nabataean script. The ʿĒṅAvdat inscription (Negev 1986) contains two lines of an Arabic prayer or hymn embedded in an Aramaic votive inscription. The text is undated, but Negev argues that it must have been composed prior to 150 CE. The second is the Namārah inscription, 328 CE, which was erected about 60 miles southeast of Damascus. The text is an epitaph of a king named *Mrʔlqyš br ʕmrw* /marʔalqays (bin) ʕamro/, which recounts his deeds and the year of his death (for bib-liography, see Macdonald 2008). Most examples of Arabic come from the substratal influence the language exercised on Nabataean Aramaic. In the Sinai, one finds the Arabic passive par-ticiple *maḏkūr*, spelled *mdkwr* in the Nabataean script, in place of Aramaic *dkyr*. The optative use of the passive participle, which is otherwise unknown in Aramaic, is no doubt the result of Arabic influence (Gzella 2011, p. 601). Loanwords from Arabic are especially frequent in the Nabataean legal papyri from Naḥal Ḥever (Yardeni 2014). Macdonald (2010) has taken this as evidence for an Arabic-language legal tradition among the Nabataeans. Loanwords occasionally occur in the Nabataean inscriptions themselves, but their formulaic nature reduces the possibility for such intrusions. Mixed Arabo-Aramaic inscriptions are also known, the best example of which is JSNab 17, dated to 267 CE (see Macdonald 2008 for bibliography). This text is not only of value for the linguistic light it sheds on Old Arabic but also for the evidence it provides for Arabic-Aramaic bilingualism in the pre-Islamic period.

2.3.4 In the Nabataeao-Arabic script

A growing corpus of texts carved in a script between Classical Nabataean Aramaic and what we consider the Arabic script from northwest Arabia provides further lexical and some morphological material for the later stages of Old Arabic in this region. These texts not only provide important insights as to the development of the Arabic script from its Nabataean forebear, but an important glimpse of the Old Ḥigāzī dialects (Nehmé 2013, 2017).

2.3.5 In the Old Arabic script

A number of inscriptions in the fully evolved Arabic script are known from the pre-Islamic period. The most famous of these are three rather short texts come from 6th c. CE Syria, two

from the southern region on the borders of the Ḥawrān – Jabal Usays (528 CE) and Ḥarrān (568 CE) – and one from Zebed (512 CE), a town near Aleppo (see Macdonald 2008, p. 470, for a short discussion and bibliography). More recently, a mid-sixth century text has been discovered at Dumat al-Jandal (Nehmé 2017) and several texts from the Ḥimà region near Nağrān (Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd 2014). These short texts shed little light on the linguistic character of Arabic and are more interesting for the information they provide regarding the evolution of the Arabic script.

2.3.6 In the Greek script

Fragmentary evidence in the Greek script, the "Graeco-Arabica", is a valuable source for the phonology of Old Arabic. This category encompasses instances of Old Arabic in Greek transcription from documentary sources. The advantage of the Greek script is that it gives us a clear view of the vocalism of Old Arabic and can shed important light on the phonetic realization of the Old Arabic phonemes. This material has been comprehensively described in Al-Jallad (2017). Finally, a single pre-Islamic Arabic text composed in Greek letters is known, labelled A1 (Al-Jallad and al-Manaser 2015).

3 Critical issues and topics: the linguistic profile of Old Arabic

Considering these sources together, we can form a rather detailed picture of Old Arabic. The following pages will outline some of the key phonological, morphological, and syntactic features that characterize the earliest stages of the language.

3.1 Phonology

There is a virtual consensus among Semiticists that the Proto-Semitic emphatic series was not pharyngealized but glottalized. While Huehnergard suggested that pharyngealization was a Proto-Arabic development (2017), there is some evidence from Safaitic and the Graeco-Arabica that this might not have been the case in the earliest stages of the language. In fact, Greek transcriptions show that the entire emphatic series was originally voiceless in Arabic, which would agree with glottalization. Moreover, vowels do not seem to be affected by their vicinity to emphatic consonants until the 6th c. CE. These observations taken together *could* suggest that glottalization was the emphatic correlate in Old Arabic (see Table 15.1; for more, see Al-Jallad 2017).

It was probably the case that the reflex of *s² retained its original value as a voiceless lateral fricative [ɬ]. This realization can be triangulated from two observations. The Safaitic glyph

Table 15.1 Reconstructed values of the emphatic consonants in Old Arabic

Proto-Semitic	*Proto-Arabic*	*Old Arabic (in Greek transcription)*	*Classical Arabic*
*[tθ’]	*t̪	τ <t>	[đ] ظ
*[t’]	*ṭ	τ <t>	[ṭ] ط
*[ts’]	*ṣ	σ <s>	[ṣ] ص
*[tɬ’]	*ś	σ <s>	[ɮ̣] ض
*[k’]	*q	κ <k>	[q] ق

corresponding to ش is never used to transcribe Aramaic š [ʃ], indicating that it had not yet achieved that value. The same sound is always transcribed as σ in Greek (2017, §3.8), which could also suggest that it did not have the value that Sibawayh described, namely, a voiceless palatal fricative [ç], as velar and post-velar fricatives are always given with the *spiritus asper*. Thus, it was probably the case that the sound preserved its original lateral value.

While all later varieties of Arabic realize Proto-Semitic *p as [f], Old Arabic may have retained a stop realization, albeit noticeably aspirated. This is suggested by the transcription of the use of π /p/ to transcribe a few Arabic names in Greek, such as Χαλιπος /ẖalīp/ = Classical Arabic *ẖalīf* (Al-Jallad 2017, §3.4). Additionally, Safaitic transcriptions of both Greek φ /ph/ and π /p/ use the glyph *f* rather than *b*, which could suggest that the former signified [pʰ] rather than [f] (Al-Jallad 2015, §3.1.1).

The *alif-maqṣūrah* is a term for when word-final *y* in the unpointed Arabic script should be pronounced as /ā/ in Classical Arabic. In Old Arabic, this sequence is always kept distinct from etymological /ā/. Spellings in Greek such as Σουφλη /suflē/ for Classical Arabic سفلى sug-gest that the *alif-maqṣūrah* was pronounced as perhaps [ai] or [e]. Safaitic and Hismaic attest forms such as *fty* (= Classical Arabic *fatan* 'youth') and *mny* (=Classical Arabic *manan* 'fate'), where the final *y* can only signal a final diphthong or triphthong and not a long vowel (for more examples, see Al-Jallad 2017, §5.1). Likewise, triphthongs seem to have obtained in all posi-tions. Thus, verbs with a glide as a third radical preserve the final triphthong: *ʔtw* 'he came', *s²ty* 'he spent the winter', *bny* 'he built'. The consonantal quality of the final glide is proved by the Graeco-Arabic inscription A1 (Al-Jallad and al-Manaser 2015), in which the verb 'he came' is transcribed as αθαοα /ʔatawa/.

3.2 Morphology

Perhaps one of the most striking morphological features of Old Arabic is the variation in the presence of definite marking and its shape. The definite article spread areally among the Central Semitic languages and it would seem that Proto-Arabic lacked any overt marking of definiteness, as indicated by the Safaitic inscription HshNSMI 5: *w lm yẖbl s¹fr* */wa lam yoẖabbal sepr/ 'and may the writing not be obscured' (referring to the present inscription, see Al-Jallad 2015, §4.8). Besides dialects with no definite article, the Safaitic inscriptions exhibit four different article forms, ordered by frequency: *h-, ʔ-, ʔl-*, and *hn-* (ibid.). The Old Arabic of the Nabataean inscriptions exhibits almost exclusively the form *ʔl-*. Unlike the Classical Arabic article, the Old Arabic *ʔl* almost never exhibits the assimilation of the coda to the coronals; the same situation is attested in the Graeco-Arabica (Al-Jallad 2017, §5.5), but in A1 the coda assimilates to the following *d*, αδαυρα */ʔad-dawra/ 'the region'. Taking in the entire Old Arabic corpus into consideration, it would appear that the *ʔl* article was a typically sedentary feature, as it is rare in the inscriptions produced by the nomads, while the nomadic dialects varied considerably in definite marking, from the more conservative Ø-marking to the innovative, *ʔ, ʔl-*, and *h-* articles.

The feminine ending *at* did not shift to *ah* in the earliest stages of the language. The Safaitic and Hismaic texts attest an invariable *-t* ending, and the same appears to be true of the earliest Nabataean Arabic, as evidenced by spellings of names such as *ẖrtt* /ẖāreṯat/ = Classical Arabic *ẖāriṯah* and *ʕbdt* /ʕobodat/ = Classical Arabic *ʕubudah*. While Greek transcriptions show a mixed situation, it is clear that by the 4th c. CE, the ending had shifted to *a(h)* in non-construct position in the settled areas (Al-Jallad 2017, §5.2.1).

The Graeco-Arabic inscription A1 proves the existence of a limited case system in the Old Arabic of the 3rd or 4th c. CE – a productive accusative case is present but there is no

evidence for a nominative or genitive. We have αλ-ιδαμι /ʔal-ʔidāmiyy/ ‘the Idāmite’ (nominative) instead of **/ʔal-ʔidāmiyyu/ and μι- Σεια /mis-seʕīᵃʕ/ ‘from Seʕīʕ’ (genitive) instead of **/mis-seʕīʕi/, but an accusative with a final /a/: (α)ουα ειραυ βακλα /wa yirʕaw baql-a/ ‘and they pastured on fresh herbage’ or αθαοα . . . αδαυρα /ʔatawa. . . ʔad-dawr-a/ ‘he came . . . to this place’ (Al-Jallad and al-Manaser 2015: 57–58).

Disconnected pieces of evidence, however, suggest that a tripartite system of case inflection was operative at least in the earliest stages of the language. The ʿĒn ʿAvdat inscription attests two common nouns with a final *-w* in the nominative case (*ʔl-mwtw* /al-mawtu/ ‘death’ and *grḥw* /gurḥu/ ‘wound’) and one noun in the accusative terminating in *-ʔ* (*ʔtrʔ* /ʔaṯara/ ‘reward’) (see Bellamy 1990, but disregard the speculation on the presence of Classical Arabic metrics). This could point towards a functional case system. Early Nabataean basileophoric and theophoric names based on genitive constructions exhibit an /o/ vowel between the first and second term, which could point towards a frozen nominative case, Θαιμομαλεχος /taymo-mālek/, Αβδοβαλος /ʕabdo-baʕl/, Αβδοαρθας /ʿabdo-ḥārṯah/ (Al-Jallad 2017, §5.5). More evidence for case inflection is provided by the consonantal script itself. In Safaitic, participles ending in a glide *y* are bi-radical in the nominative, *dm* /dāmī/ ‘drawing’ √dmy, but tri-radical in the accusative, *dmy* /dāmeya/ idem., suggesting the presence of a final vowel in the latter syntactic position (Al-Jallad 2015, §4.6). Vestiges of the genitive ending are frozen in Nabataean theophoric names, such as *tymʾlhy* /taym(o)-allāhi/ and *ʕbdʔlbʕly* /ʕabd(o)-al-baʕli/ (Negev 1991, s.v.).

While there is enough evidence to restore a three-part case system for Old Arabic, although it was clearly lost in some areas before the Islamic period, the existence of nunation is much more difficult to confirm. Rare vestiges of the feature are found in the Safaitic inscriptions, *ʔmtn* ‘Libra’ (usually *ʔmt*) and *mḥltn* ‘dearth of pasture’ (usually *mḥlt*), but both of these examples can be disputed (see Al-Jallad 2015, §4.5b–α). No evidence for the feature appears in Greek transcription or in the Nabataean script.

The existence of mood inflection is confirmed in the spellings of verbs with y/w as the third root consonant. Verbs of this class in result clauses are spelled in such a way that they must have originally terminated in /a/: *f ygzy nḏr-h* */pa yagzeya naḏra-hu/ ‘that he may fulfill his vow’ (Graf and Zwettler 2004). Sometimes verbs terminate in a *-n,* which may reflect an energic ending, thus, *sʾʕ-nh* ‘join him!’ perhaps */śeʕannoh/ (Al-Jallad 2015, §4.14.2).

A few demonstrative pronouns are attested, but in general these are rare. The commonest form is a proclitic *h-*, which does not inflect for gender or number (Al-Jallad 2015, §4.8f). The masculine singular form *ḏʔ* and *ḏh* are attested in Hismaic; Safaitic attests *ḏ*, and the Harran inscription (568 CE) attests the form *dʔ*, which can only be /ḏā/. The feminine singular is more difficult to identify. A clear attestation of a *t*-based feminine demonstrative occurs in the Namara inscription as *ty* /tī/, and in Safaitic as well, *t h- sʾnt* ‘this year’. A feminine *ḏ*, however, is also attested, *ḏ h- dr* ‘this region’ (see Al-Jallad 2015, §4.9). The plural is attested as *ʔly* in Safaitic (Al-Jallad 2017b).

Relative pronouns are more frequently attested and exhibit a more unified form. In Hismaic and Safaitic the masculine singular form is attested as *ḏ* /ḏVV/, and in two inscriptions in Safaitic, agreement in definiteness is observed, producing the form *hḏ* /haḏḏVV/*;* feminine singular *ḏʔt* */ḏāʔ(a)t/ (but rarely *ḏʔ* and *ḏt*), and plural *ḏw* */ḏawVV/ (Al-Jallad 2015, §4.10). The Namarah Inscription also exhibits *dw*, probably */ḏū/, without inflection for case. Only the Old Arabic inscription in the Dadanitic script (JSLih 384) exhibits a reflex of the *ʔallaḏī* type relative pronoun, the feminine singular *ʔlt* /ʔallatī/. I have argued elsewhere that the *ʔalla-* base may be an isogloss of the old Higāzī dialects (Al-Jallad 2015, §1.2).

3.3 Syntax

Perhaps one of the most marked differences between Old Arabic and later varieties is the syntax of the infinitive. Instead of the *ʔan + subjunctive verb* construction of Classical Arabic or the serial verb constructions of the modern dialects, Old Arabic employs a nominal form to express many of the meanings expressed by finite verbs in later stages of the language (see Al-Jallad 2015, §16 for more examples).

(1) *ṣyr* *qyẓ* ***rʕy***
he returned to water dry season to pasture
'he returned to permanent water in the dry season to pasture'

(2) *wrd* *mn-tlʕn* ***tḏbʔ***
he-came-down from- Tlʕn to raid
'he came down from Tlʕn to raid'

(3) *mrd* *ʕl- h- mlk* *grfṣ* ***ksʾr*** *h-sʾlsʾlt*
he rebelled against-the king Grfṣ to break the chains of bondage
'he rebelled against Agrippa the king to break the chains of bondage'

The unmarked word order is verb first, and the subject can precede or follow its object, perhaps reflecting nuances of focus or topic. No overt marker of existential predication is attested; instead, as found marginally in Classical Arabic and other Semitic languages, existential sentences can be formed simply through the juxtaposition of the two elements, for example, *ṯlg b- h- dr b- rʔy ʕqbt* 'there was snow in this region during the rising of Scorpio'; *bhʔ brkt w bqʕl* 'he rejoiced at Brkt because there was herbage' (Al-Jallad 2015, §12.1). Both definite and indefinite heads can form asyndetic relative clauses, e.g. *wgm ʕl- bn dd -h msʾby sʾbyt -h ṯyʔ* 'he grieved for his paternal uncle's son, who was captured, whom Ṭayyiʾ (the tribe) captured' (Al-Jallad 2015, §17.1).

3.4 Old Arabic and the modern dialects

The relationship between Old Arabic and the modern dialects is open to investigation. Several features attested in Old Arabic are found in the modern dialects but do not appear as part of Classical Arabic. The Graeco-Arabica has put to rest one of the great debates in the history of Arabic, namely, whether case inflection had disappeared in some pre-Islamic dialects. The evidence from the Petra Papyri, 6th c. CE, confirms the loss of this feature, at least when it is expressed by final short vowels: Αρβαθ Γαρουαν /ḫarbat Garwān/ 'the ruin of Garwān'; Μαθ Λελα /māt leylā/ 'the plot of land of Layla' (Al-Jallad et al. 2013). Had case inflection survived in these forms, we would expect the first term of the genitive constructions to terminate in a case vowel (see above section 3.2). Other similarities include the demonstrative prefix *h-*, which is found in modern vernaculars, e.g. *hal-walad* 'this boy' and the ancient varieties. The syntax of adnominal demonstratives finds parallels in the modern dialects, for example: JSNab 17 *ʔl-qbrw dʔ* /ʔal-qabro ḏā/ 'this grave' which is found in many modern dialects, e.g. Egyptian Arabic il-walad da 'this boy'. At the morphological level, one may point towards the perfective use of the active participle in Safaitic, which is shared with many modern dialects, e.g. Levantine Arabic *anaa* šeerib 'I have drunk' with Safaitic (Al-Jallad 2015, §5.5b).

(4) *s²ty* *ʕnzt* ***nfr*** *mn- ʔ-rm*
he-wintered ʕnzt having-fled from- def.- Romans
'he spent the winter at ʕnzt **having fled** from the Romans'

The lexicon of Old Arabic is largely unexplored, but promises to be a fertile avenue of future research.

4 Current contributions and research

There is currently only a single monograph-length study dedicated to the subject of Old Arabic, Mascitelli (2006). Its definition of Old Arabic is rather traditional, relying mainly on inscriptions that attest the definite article *ʔal*. This greatly reduces the scope of the study. Moreover, it includes several Ancient South Arabian texts that most scholars would consider to be in a northern variety of Sabaic rather than Arabic (96–102). Macdonald (2008) is a useful encyclopedia article outlining the corpus of Old Arabic, but again focusing mainly on inscriptions that contain the definite article *ʔal*. Several outlines of the linguistic geography of Arabia exist (Beeston 1981; Robin 1991a, b), but these are now outdated in light of the rapid pace of new discoveries. For the emergence of Arabic as a written language, or rather Arabic as a language written in the late Nabataean script, see the contribution of M.C.A. Macdonald in Fiema et al. (2015). The subject is also the theme of the *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 40* (ed. M.C.A. Macdonald 2010). A forthcoming monograph (Al-Jallad forthcoming) attempts a detailed, synthesized history of Arabic from its earliest attestations to modern times.

5 Future directions

In addition to completing our understanding of the grammar of Old Arabic, which is dependent upon new discoveries and advances in the interpretation of difficult texts, much work remains to be done on the question of how Arabic became a written language and the spread of the Nabataeo-Arabic script at the expense of the indigenous alphabets of Arabia. The circumstances under which the Ancient North Arabian scripts disappeared remain shrouded in mystery. Advances in our knowledge of the pre-Islamic varieties of Arabic allow for the study of Arabic's history through an entirely different scope. Authentic pre-Islamic texts will allow scholars to address issues such as language contact and diglossia before the Islamic conquests. It is hoped that historical Arabic linguists will utilize the growing body of documentary evidence from the pre-Islamic period to unravel developmental trajectory of later forms of Arabic – both Classical Arabic and the modern dialects.

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Further reading

Al-Jallad, A., forthcoming. What is Ancient North Arabian? *In:* Na'ama Pat-El and Daniel Birnstiel (eds.) Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

This book chapter discusses the linguistic profiles of the Ancient North Arabian corpora and positions Old Arabic in space and time.

Fisher, G., ed., 2015. *Arabs and empires before Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This book contains a rich anthology of sources for this history of Arabs in the pre-Islamic period. Contributors represent a broad disciplinary range, including archaeology, classics, history, and linguistics/philology (see especially chapter 7).

Macdonald, M. C. A., 2015. On the uses of writing in ancient Arabia and the role of palaeography in studying them. *Arabian Epigraphic Notes*, 1, 1–50.

This important article critically discusses the use of palaeography (the study of letter forms) to date inscriptions, and the great danger in this practice with regard to the inscriptions of Arabia.

Robin, C., 1991. Les plus anciens monuments de la langue arabe. *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 61, 113–125.

This is a classic discussion of the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions composed in the Arabic or Nabataean script, in addition to the Rbbl bn Hf ̔m grave inscription from Qaryat al-Fāw.