

Chapter 2

Pre-Islamic Arabic

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This chapter provides an overview of Arabic in contact in the pre-Islamic period, from the early first millennium BCE to the rise of Islam. Contact languages include Akkadian, Aramaic, Ancient South Arabian, Canaanite, Dadanitic, and Greek. The chapter concludes with two case studies on contact-induced development: the emergence of the definite article and the realization of the feminine ending.

1 Preliminaries

1.1 Language contact in the pre-Islamic period

[I]n the Djāhiliyya, “the Age of Ignorance” [...], the Arabs lived to a great extent in almost complete isolation from the outer world... [t]his accounts for the prima facie astonishing fact that Arabic, though appearing on the stage of history hundreds of years after the Canaanites and Aramaeans, nevertheless in many respects has a more archaic character than these old Semitic languages. The Arabs, being almost completely isolated from outer influences and living under the same primitive conditions of their ancestors preserved the archaic structure of their language. (Blau 1981: 18).

This is the image of Arabic’s pre-Islamic past that emerges from Classical Arabic sources. For writers such as Ibn Khaldūn, contact-induced change in Arabic was a by-product of the Arab conquests, and served to explain the differences between the colloquial(s) of his time and the literary language. More than a century and a half of epigraphic and archaeological research in Arabia and adjacent areas has rendered this view of Arabic’s past untenable. Arabic first appears in the epigraphic record in the early first millennium BCE, and for most of its pre-Islamic history, the language interacted in diverse ways with a number of related



Semitic languages and Greek. This chapter will outline the various foci of contact between Arabic and other languages in the pre-Islamic period based on documentary evidence. Following this, I offer two short case studies showing how contact-induced change in the pre-Islamic period may explain some of the key features of Arabic today.

1.2 Old Arabic

Old Arabic is an umbrella term for the diverse forms of the language attested in documentary and literary sources from the pre-Islamic period, including inscriptions, papyri, and transcriptions in Greek, Latin, and cuneiform texts. The present usage does not refer to Classical Arabic or the linguistic material attributed to the pre-Islamic period collected in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, such as poetry and proverbs, as we cannot be sure about their authenticity, especially with regard to their linguistic features. Al-Jallad (2017) defines the corpus of Old Arabic as follows: Safaitic, an Ancient North Arabian script concentrated in the Syro-Jordanian Ḥarraḥ (end of the 1st millennium BCE to 4th c. CE), Hismaic, an Ancient North Arabian script spanning from central Jordan to northwest Arabia (chronology unclear, but overlapping with Nabataean), the substratum of Nabataean Aramaic, along with a few Arabic-language texts carved in this script (2nd c. BCE to 4th c. CE), the Nabataeo-Arabic inscriptions (3rd c. CE to 5th c. CE), pre-Islamic Arabic script inscriptions (5th c. CE to early 7th c. CE) and isolated inscriptions in the Greek, Dadanitic (the oasis of Dadān, modern-day al-ʿUlā, northwest Ḥiǧāz), and Ancient South Arabian alphabets (varied chronology).

In geographic terms, Old Arabic is attested mainly in the southern Levant, the Sinai, and northwestern Arabia, as far south as Ḥegrā (Madāʿin Ṣāleḥ). Within this area a variety of non-Arabic languages were spoken and written, with which Old Arabic interacted. The main contact language was Imperial Aramaic, which served as a literary language across North Arabia in the latter half of the first millennium BCE until, perhaps, the rise of Islam. Since contact must be viewed through the lens of writing, it is in most cases difficult to determine how extensive multilingualism was outside of literate circles.

2 Contact languages

2.1 Arabic and Akkadian

The first attestations of Arabic are preserved in cuneiform documents. While no Arabic texts written in cuneiform have yet been discovered, isolated lexical

items survive in this medium. Livingstone (1997) identified an example of the Old Arabic word for ‘camel’ with the definite article in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE): *a-na-qa-a-te* = *(h/?)an-nāq-āte* ‘the she-camels’. Aside from this, almost all other Arabic material consists of personal and divine names. There are reports of “Arabs” in Mesopotamia – inhabiting walled towns in western Babylonia – as early as the eighth century BCE (Eph’al 1974: 112). While we cannot be sure that the people whom the Babylonians called Arabs were in fact Arabic speakers, a few texts in dispersed Ancient North Arabian scripts hail from this region. So far, all seem to contain only personal names with Arabic or Arabian etymologies.¹ These facts can only suggest the possibility of contact between speakers of Arabic and Akkadian in the early first millennium BCE.

2.2 Arabic and Canaanite

Contact between Arabic speakers and speakers of Canaanite languages is documented in the Hebrew Bible (Eph’al 1982: ch.2; Retsö 2003: ch.8), and there is one inscription directly attesting to contact between both groups. An Ancient North Arabian inscription from Bāyir, Jordan contains a prayer in Old Arabic to three gods of the Iron Age Canaanite kingdoms of Moab, Ammon, and Edom (Hayajneh et al. 2015). The text is accompanied by a Canaanite inscription, which remains undeciphered. The reading of the Arabic according to the edition is as follows:

- (1) Bāyir inscription (Hayajneh et al. 2015)

h mlkm w-kms w-qws b-km ḥwḏn h-ʔshy
 VOC PN CONJ-PN CONJ-PN PREP-2PL.M protect.PRF.1PL DEM-well.PL
 m-mdwst
 PREP-ruin

‘O Malkom, Kemosh, and Qaws, we place under your protection these wells against ruin.’

2.3 Arabic and Aramaic

Evidence for contact between Arabic and Aramaic spans from the middle of the first millennium BCE to the late sixth century CE, and is concentrated in the southern Levant and northwest Arabia.² Perhaps one of the earliest examples

¹“Dispersed Ancient North Arabian” is a temporary term given to the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions on seals, pottery, bricks, etc. which have been found in various parts of Mesopotamia and elsewhere (Macdonald 2000: 33).

²See Stein (2018) on the role of Aramaic in the Arabian Peninsula in the pre-Islamic period.

of Arabic speakers using Aramaic as a written language comes from the fifth-century-BCE Nile Delta. A king of Qedar, Qayno son of Gošam,³ commissioned an Aramaic votive inscription dedicated to *hn-ʔlt* ‘the goddess’ (Rabinowitz 1956). Arabic names can be found in transcription across the Levant in Aramaic inscriptions (Israel 1995), and in most cases names with an Arabic etymology terminating in the characteristic final -w, reflecting an original nominative case (Al-Jallad forthcoming).

Arabic and Aramaic language contact reaches a climax in the written record at the end of the first millennium BCE with the arrival of inscriptions in the Nabataean script. The Nabataeans established a kingdom in the region of Edom in the fourth century BCE, which at its greatest extent spanned from the Ḥawrān to the northern Ḥiḡāz. While they, like their contemporaries across the Near East, wrote in a form of Imperial Aramaic, the spoken language of the royal house and large segments of the population was Arabic. Unlike other examples of Aramaic written by Arabic speakers so far, Nabataean incorporated Arabic elements into its writing school, such as the optative use of the perfect, the negator *yayr*, and a significant number of lexical items relating to daily life (Gzella 2015: 242–243).

Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of contact between the two languages is found in Nabataean legal papyri from the Judaeian desert (1st–2nd c. CE). These Aramaic-language legal documents contain a number of glosses in Arabic, for example: *ʔqd* /ʔaqd/ ‘contract’; *mʕnm* /maʕnam/ ‘profit’; *prʕ* /faraʕ/ ‘to branch out’; *ʕnʕh* /ʕanʕah/ ‘handiwork’, etc. (Yardeni 2014). Macdonald (2010: 20) has suggested, based on this evidence, that Nabataean legal proceedings would have taken place in Arabic, while all written records were made in Aramaic.

In addition to the use of Arabic within Aramaic, a unique votive inscription from ʔEn ʔAvdat (Negev, Israel) contains three verses of an Arabic hymn to the deified Nabataean king ʔObodat embedded within an Aramaic text. While undated (but likely earlier than 150 CE), the text is certainly the earliest example of continuous Arabic language written in the Nabataean script, as before this almost all examples are isolated words and personal names.

³The symbol *š* denotes the Old Arabic reflex of Classical Arabic <ش>, which is usually transcribed *š*. /š/ was likely realized as a voiceless lateral fricative [ʃ].

(2) ʔEn ʔAvdat inscription⁴

a. Aramaic

dkyr b-ṭb q[r]ʔ qdm ʔbdt ʔlhʔ
 remember.PTCP.PASS PREP-good read.PTCP.ACT PREP PN god.DEF
 w-dkyr mn ktb grmʔlhy br
 CONJ-remember.PTCP.PASS REL write.PRF.3SG.M PN son.CS
 tymʔlhy šlm lqbl ʔbdt ʔlhʔ
 PN be_secure.PRF.3SG.M PREP PN god.DEF

‘May he who reads this aloud be remembered for good before ʔObodat the god, and may he who wrote be remembered. May Garmallāhi son of Taymallāhi be secure in the presence of ʔObodat (the god).’

b. Arabic

p-ypʔl lʔ pdʔ w-lʔ ʔtrʔ p-kn
 CONJ-act.IMPF.3SG.M NEG ransom.ACC CONJ-NEG scar.ACC CONJ-be.INF
 hnʔ ybʔ-nʔ ʔl-mwtw lʔ ʔbʔ-h
 here seek.IMPF.3SG.M-1PL DEF-death.NOM NEG make.obtain.INF-3SG.M
 p-kn hnʔ ʔrd grḥw lʔ
 CONJ-be.INF here want.PRF.3SG.M wound.NOM NEG
 yrd-nʔ
 want.IMPF.3SG.M-1PL

‘May he act that there be neither ransom nor scar; so be it that death would seek us, may he not aid its seeking, and so be it that a wound would desire (a victim), let it not desire us!’

c. Aramaic

grmʔlhy ktb yd-h
 PN writing.cs hand.3SG.M

‘Garmallāhi, the writing of his hand.’

The presence of Aramaic is much more lightly felt in the desert hinterland to the east and north of Nabataea. A small handful of Safaitic–Aramaic bilingual inscriptions are known (Hayajneh 2009: 214–215). In one Safaitic text, produced by a Nabataean, the author gives his name and affiliation to social groups in a type of Aramaic, but then writes the remainder of the inscription in Old Arabic, suggesting that this individual may have been bilingual.

⁴This is my translation; the *editio princeps* is Negev, Naveh & Shaked (1986); it is discussed most recently in Fiema et al. (2015: 399–402) and Kropp (2017).

- (3) Nabataean Safaitic (Al-Jallad 2015: 19; C 2820)

l ʔʔsd bn rbʔl bn ʔʔsd bn rbʔl nbṭwy slmy w
 PREP PN son.CS PN son.CS PN son.CS PN Nabataean Salamite CONJ
 brḥ ḥlqt śty h-dr w
 depart.PRF.3SG.M period.CS winter DEF-region CONJ
 tōr h-smy
 keep_watch.PRF.3SG.M DEF-sky

‘By ʔAʔsad son of Rabbʔel son of ʔAʔsad son of Rabbʔel, the Nabataean Salamite, and he set off from this place for the period of winter and kept watch for the rains.’

A handful of Aramaic loans are found in the Safaitic inscriptions: *sfr* ‘writing’; *ʔsyt* ‘hide, trap’; *lṣt* ‘thief’, ultimately from Greek *lēistēs*. Other words, such as *mdbr* /madbar/ ‘the Hamad, wilderness’ and *nḥl* /naḥl/ ‘valley’, are absent in Classical Arabic yet appear in the Northwest Semitic languages. These do not appear to be loans, however, as their meanings and phonologies are local and Arabic, respectively. They should instead be regarded as genuine cognates that did not make it into the Islamic-period lexica.

2.4 *Provincia Arabia* and the Nabataeo-Arabic script

In 106 CE, under circumstances that remain poorly understood, the Romans annexed the Nabataean Kingdom and established their Province of Arabia. While Nabataean political independence ended, their script, writing tradition and language continued to thrive and evolve. This is exemplified by the famous tomb inscription of Raqōs bint ʔAbd-Manōto from Madāʔin Ṣāliḥ. Dated to 267 CE, the text is a legal inscription associated with the grave of a woman who died in al-Ḥegr. Unlike other grave inscriptions at this site, the Raqōs inscription is composed almost entirely in Arabic, with the Aramaic components restricted to the introductory demonstrative *dnh* ‘this’, the words for ‘son’ and ‘daughter’, the dating formula, and the name of the deity. The Aramaic components are bolded below:

- (4) Madāʔin Ṣāliḥ inscription (JSNab 17)⁵

dnh qbrw ṣnʔ-h kʔbw **br** ḥrtt l-rqwš **brt**
 DEM grave build.PRF.3SG.M-3SG.M PN SON PN PREP-PN daughter
 ʔbdmṇwtw ʔm-h w-h hlkt fy ʔl-ḥgrwy **šnt**
 PN mother-3SG.M CONJ-3SG.F die.PRF.3SG.F PREP DEF-PN year

⁵For the latest discussion of this text, see Macdonald’s contribution to Fiema et al. (2015: 402–405).

mʔh w-štyn w-tryn b-yrḥ tmwz
 hundred CONJ-sixty CONJ-TWO PREP-month Tammūz
w-lʔn mryʕlmʔ mn yšnʔ ʔl-qbrw d[ʔ]
 CONJ-curse.PRF.3SG.M PN REL desecrate.IMPF.3SG.M DEF-grave DEM
w-mn yfṯh-h ḥšy w wld-h
 CONJ-REL open.IMPF.3SG.M-3SG.M except w children-3SG.M
w-lʔn mn yqbr w-yʕly
 CONJ-curse.PRF.3SG.M REL bury.IMPF.3SG.M CONJ-remove.IMPF.3SG.M
mn-h
 PREP-3SG.M

‘This is a grave that Kaʕbo **son** of Ḥāreθat constructed for Raqōś **daughter** of ʕAbd-Manōto, his mother, and she perished in al-Ḥegro **year one hundred and sixty two in the month of Tammūz**. **May the Lord of the World** curse anyone who desecrates this grave and anyone who would open it, with the exception of his children, and may he curse anyone who would bury or remove from it (a body).’

During the same period, the classical Nabataean script continues to evolve towards what we consider the Arabic script (Nehmé 2010). Its letter forms take on a more cursive character, and the connecting element of each letter goes across the bottom of the text. Nehmé considers the letter forms typical of the Arabic script to have evolved from Nabataean between the third and fifth centuries CE. In inscriptions from this period, the Arabic component begins to increase at the expense of Aramaic (Nehmé 2017). This trend may suggest that knowledge of Aramaic was waning in these centuries, or that the writing tradition itself was transforming – Aramaic was slowly being replaced by Arabic. If we think in terms of writing schools, there may not have been much Arabic–Aramaic bilingualism in Arabia outside of the scribal class – indeed, scholars have continued to debate whether Nabataean Aramaic was ever a colloquial, and there are good arguments to doubt that it was (Gzella 2015: 240). The remnants of Aramaic in the latest phases of the Nabataeo-Arabic inscriptions, however, most certainly functioned as a code, grams for Arabic words, a situation comparable to the Aramaeograms of Pahlavi (cf. Nyberg 1974).

2.5 The Arabic inscriptions of the sixth century CE

In Arabic inscriptions of the sixth century, written Arabic and Aramaic continue the stable situation of contact witnessed in the Nabataeo-Arabic period. Aramaic fossils are employed in dating formulae and the word for ‘son’, and possibly the

first person pronoun. But otherwise, the language of these texts is entirely Arabic. Perhaps the most famous among these is the inscription of Jebel Usays, given in (5), in which the Aramaic components are bolded.

- (5) Jebel Usays inscription⁶
ʔnh⁷ r̥qym **br** m̥r̥f ʔl-ʔwsy ʔrsl-ny ʔlhrt ʔl-mlk ʔly
 1SG PN SON PN DEF-Awsite send.PRF.3SG.M-1SG PN DEF-king PREP
 ʔsys msl̥h snt 423
 Usays outpost year 423
 ‘I, Ruqaym **son** of Muʔarrif the Awsite, al-Ḥārīṯ the king sent me to
 Usays as an outpost, year 423.’ [= 528/9 CE]

2.6 Arabic, Greek and Aramaic in sixth-century Petra

In 1993, a corpus of carbonized Greek papyri – some 140 rolls – was discovered at the Byzantine church of Petra.⁸ These documents attest to a trilingual situation at the city: Greek served as the official administrative language, while Arabic and Aramaic appear to have been spoken languages. The microtoponyms (names of small plots of lands and vineyards) are in both Arabic and Aramaic, and often-times the same word is expressed in both languages, as in Table 1.

Table 1: Arabic–Aramaic equivalents in the Petra Papyri (Al-Jallad 2018a: 41)

Translation	Arabic	Aramaic
‘land markers’	أرām /ārām/	Εραμαεία /eramayyā/
‘farm’	αλ-Ναῖβα /al-naṣbah/	Ναῖβαθα /naṣbatā/
‘canal’	αλ-Κεῖβεβ /al-qeṣeb/	Κιῖβα/Κεῖῖβα /qiṣbā/

This naturally suggests that, alongside literacy in Greek, there was spoken bilingualism in Arabic and Aramaic, perhaps a stable situation extending back to Nabataean times.

⁶For the latest discussion of this text, see Macdonald’s contribution to Fiema et al. (2015: 405).

⁷While it has been suggested that the spelling *ʔnh* reflects a pausal form (Larcher 2010), it seems more likely in light of the Thaʔlabah Nabataeo-Arabic inscription (Avner et al. 2013), which spells ‘I’ as *ʔnh*, that this form reflects the Aramaic spelling of the pronoun rather than an Arabic variant.

⁸These papyri are edited in a five-volume series: the *Petra Papyri I–V* (2002–2018), various editors, Amman: American Center of Oriental Research. See Arjava et al. (2018) for the last volume.

2.7 Arabic and Ancient South Arabian

Classical Arabic sources note a situation of close contact between Arabic and “Ḥimyaritic”, a term used for a language they associated with the pre-Islamic kingdom of Ḥimyar in what is today Yemen. The pre-Islamic inscriptions from the northern Yemeni Jawf, the so-called Haram region, attest to a similar situation. These texts are composed in Sabaic, but contain a significant admixture of non-Sabaic linguistic material. Some scholars (e.g. Robin 1991) have considered Arabic to be the contributing source, but in most cases the non-Sabaic linguistic features are not specific to Arabic, such as the use of the causative verb ʔaCCaC , which is attested in Aramaic and Gəʕəz for example, rather than haCCaC as in Sabaic. As Macdonald (2000: 55) rightly puts it, these inscriptions are basically Sabaic, with a small admixture from North Arabian languages, but not necessarily Arabic. Four texts from this region, however, exhibit the Arabic isogloss of *lam* for past-tense negation, suggesting that some form of Arabic may have contributed to their mixed character.⁹

Mixed North/South Arabian texts can be found further to the north, in Nağrān and Qaryat al-Fāw. The most famous is perhaps the grave inscription of *Rbbl bn Hfym*. This unique text attests features that can be attributed to both non-Sabaic and Sabaic sources. On the non-Sabaic side, it uses the definite article ʔl , the causative morpheme ʔ- rather than h- , and occasionally the 3rd person pronoun h rather than hw . At the same time, the text employs mimation, clitic pronouns with long vowels, e.g. -hw , and prepositions not known in Arabic (Al-Jallad 2018b: 30). At Nağrān, one occasionally encounters Arabic lexical items, such as *ldy* ‘at’ and *ʕnd* ‘with’ in otherwise perfectly good South Arabian texts. So then, how are we to interpret the mixed character of these texts? For Qaryat al-Fāw, Durand (2017: 95, fn.32) has suggested, based on the significant amount of Petraean pottery, that a sizable Nabataean colony existed at the oasis. It could be the case that Nabataean colonists introduced Arabic to the oasis, where it naturally gained prestige as a trade language given its links with the north. The mixed nature of some of the inscriptions of this site could therefore be interpreted in two ways. If they reflect a spoken variety, then perhaps they are the result of convergence between the Arabic introduced by the Nabataeans and Sabaic, similar to the modern dialects of Yemeni Arabic today, which are essentially Arabic with a significant South Arabian admixture.¹⁰ If we are dealing with an artificial scribal register, then the language may be the result of a scribe attempting to produce

⁹For a list of the Haram inscriptions, see Macdonald (2000: 61), who labels these texts Sabaeo-North-Arabian.

¹⁰On these varieties, see Watson (2018).

a text in Arabic, for an Arabic-speaking customer, but inadvertently introducing Sabaicisms from the language he is more used to writing. A similar phenomenon might be at play in the Aramaic–Hasaitic tomb inscription from Mleiha.¹¹ There, the scribe – seemingly unintentionally – uses the Aramaic word for son, *br*, in the Hasaitic portion of the text, suggesting perhaps that he was bilingual and more used to writing in Aramaic (Overlaet et al. 2016).

2.8 Arabic in the Ḥiḡāz

Before the arrival of the Nabataeans, the written language of the oasis of al-ʿUlā and associated environs in the northern Ḥiḡāz was Dadanitic, a non-Arabic Central Semitic language. A few texts, however, display features that are unambiguously Arabic. The best known of these is JSLih 384. This short text is written in the Dadanitic script but seems to be, in other respects, produced in a dialect of Old Arabic, notably making use of the relative pronoun *?lt* /ʔallati/. Two other Dadanitic texts make use of the Arabic construction *?n yʃl*, that is, the use of the subordinator *?an* with a modal verb. In addition to this, one occasionally finds the *?(l)* definite article employed in these inscriptions. The interpretation of this contact situation, like that in South Arabia, is unclear. Do these few texts represent the writings of travelers or immigrants from the north, whose spoken language influenced the dictation of text to the scribe? Or do they reflect unique points on a dialect continuum? The complex linguistic situation at ancient Dadan is the subject of a fascinating study by Kootstra (2019).

2.9 Arabic and the languages of the Thamudic inscriptions

Even more difficult to distill is the possible contact situation between Arabic and the more shadowy pre-Arabic Semitic languages of north and central Arabia. We are afforded a small glimpse of these languages by the laconic Thamudic inscriptions, mainly those classified in the C, D, and F scripts.¹² While it is difficult to say much about the languages these scripts express, they are clearly distinct from Arabic (Al-Jallad 2017: 321–322). The only evidence for contact between Arabic and any of these languages is found in the tomb inscription of Raqōs at Madāʿin Šāliḥ, illustrated in (4). This text, as discussed in §2.4, is written mainly in Arabic, with a few fossilized Aramaic components. Alongside the main inscription, there is a short text inscribed in the Thamudic D script stating: *?n rqš bnt ʃbdmnt* ‘This is Raqōs, daughter of ʃAbdo-Manōto’. The use of the introductory element

¹¹Hasaitic is the name given to the pre-Islamic script and language of East Arabia.

¹²Thamudic B, C, and D are discussed in Macdonald (2000) and Al-Jallad (2017; 2018b); Thamudic F is outlined in Prioletta & Robin (2018).

?n ‘this’ or perhaps ‘for’, rather than the Arabic demonstrative *d?* /*ðā*/ or perhaps its feminine equivalent *dy* /*ðī*/, employed in the Nabataean text, indicates that we are dealing with a third language.¹³ Did Raqōs originally hail from a nomadic community who spoke a non-Arabic Semitic language expressed in the Thamudic D script? And did she later come to live in Arabic-speaking Ḥegrā? Was the use of this script on her grave a tribute to her heritage? These questions are impossible to answer with the data available to us now, but they widen the scope of investigation when examining Arabic’s history. The available fragments of evidence support the suggestion put forth recently by Souag (2018): we must consider the possibility of unknown Semitic substrate(s) in the development of early Arabic.

2.10 Arabic and Greek

The nexus of Arabic–Greek contact, based on the inscriptions known so far, is the Syro-Jordanian Harrah, the basalt desert that stretches from the Hawrān to northern Arabia. Greek inscriptions are occasionally found throughout this region, interacting with the local Arabic dialects in diverse ways. The commonest type of bilingual text consists of simple signatures in Safaitic and Greek. These texts, illustrated in (6), only prove that the author knew how to write his name in Greek, and do not constitute evidence for genuine bilingualism.

(6) Graeco-Arabic inscription A1 (Al-Jallad & al-Manaser 2016: 56)

- a. Greek
Θαιμος Γαφαλου
Taym Gaḥfal
‘Taym, son of Gaḥfal’
- b. Arabic
l-tm bn gḥfl
PREP-Taym son Gaḥfal
‘for/by Taym, son of Gaḥfal’

The second inscription discussed by Al-Jallad & al-Manaser (2016), illustrated in (7), provides more insight into the different degrees of Arabic–Greek bilingualism. The author carves a short text in both Greek and Old Arabic, indicating that he knew both languages but that his command of Arabic was obviously better.

¹³While it is tempting to interpret ?n as the first-person singular pronoun ?nā, such a formula would indeed be strange in a grave epitaph. Perhaps ?n is cognate with the demonstrative/presentative element *han, or perhaps it should be construed as a dative ‘to, for’ cognate with East Semitic *ana*.

(7) Graeco-Arabic inscription 2 (Al-Jallad & al-Manaser 2016: 58)

a. Arabic

l-γθ w thll ʔfwh ʔql sr
PREP-Ghawth CONJ go.PRF.3SG.M PREP protected_area Sayr
'By Ghawth and he went into the protected area of Sayr.'

b. Greek

Γαυτος ἀπῆλθεν [ε]ἰς τόν Ακελον Σαιρου
Ghawth.NOM depart.AOR.3SG PREP DEF.M.ACC.SG ʔaql.ACC.SG Sayr.GEN
'Ghawth, he went away to the ʔaql of Sayr.'

The author translates the Arabic into Greek effectively, but seems not to have known the Greek word for the culturally specific term *ʔaql*, 'a protected area of pasturage'. In this case, he simply wrote the word out in Greek: *Ακελον*.

There is evidence that some nomadic Arabic speakers did master the Greek language, as one sometimes comes across very well-composed texts in Greek, attesting to full-scale bilingualism, at least in writing (for example A2 in Al-Jallad & al-Manaser (2015)). This level of bilingualism, however, must have been rare. There is no appreciable influence from Greek on the Arabic of the Safaitic inscriptions. A few loanwords are known, e.g. *qsr* 'Caesar', *lʃt* 'thief', but these more likely come through Aramaic.

2.11 Arabic in eastern Arabia

The inscriptional record of eastern Arabia is relatively poor when compared to the western two-thirds of the Peninsula. Nevertheless, the extant texts point towards contact between Aramaic and the local Arabian language, called Hasaitic by scholars. This language, however, cannot be regarded as a form of Arabic, and there are no pre-Islamic attestations of Arabic from eastern Arabia yet (Al-Jallad 2018b: 260–261).

3 Grammatical features arising from contact

This section offers a contact-based explanation for two linguistic features found in Old Arabic: the definite article, and the realization of the feminine ending.

3.1 Definite article

It has long been established that the overt marking of definiteness in the Semitic languages is a relatively late innovation (Huehnergard & Rubin 2011: 260–261).

All varieties of Arabic today attest some form of the definite article – most commonly variants of *ʔal* but other forms exist as well, mainly in southwest Arabia, including *am*, *an*, and *a-*, with gemination of the following consonant. In light of the comparative evidence, did Arabic innovate this feature independently or was contact with other Semitic languages involved?

The evidence suggests that the prefixed article *han- emerged in the central Levant sometime in the late second millennium BCE, after the diversification of Northwest Semitic (Tropper 2001; Gzella 2006; Pat-El 2006). It seems clear that by the early first millennium BCE, the article had spread across the southern Levant and to North Arabia, as it is found in Taymanitic, Thamudic B, and Dadanitic, as well as in the Old Arabic of the Safaitic inscriptions. In the latter case, contact with Canaanite is substantiated in the inscriptional record in the form of the Bāyir inscription (see §2.2 above).

All of these languages, including the earliest Old Arabic, took over the form of the article unchanged; that is *h-* with the assimilation of the /n/ before a consonant, the exception being Dadanitic, which preserves the /n/ before laryngeal consonants, e.g. *h-mlk* /ham-malk/ ‘the king’ vs. *hn-ʔly* ‘the upper’ /han-ʔaʕlay/. We cannot, however, argue for the spread of the definite article to Proto-Arabic. The original, article-less situation is attested in the inscriptions of Central Jordan stretching down to the Hismā, known as Hismaic (Graf & Zwettler 2004). These texts are in unambiguously Arabic language, but they lack the definite article. The *h-*morpheme exists, but it has a strong demonstrative force. Indeed, in a few Nabataean–Hismaic bilingual inscriptions, the definite article *ʔl* of the Nabataean component is rendered as zero in the Hismaic text (Hayajneh 2009). A minority of Safaitic inscriptions also lack the definite article (Al-Jallad 2018b), showing that it had not spread to all varieties of Arabic even as late as the turn of the Era. Thus, like Hebrew and Aramaic, the earliest linguistic stages of Arabic – and indeed Proto-Arabic – lacked a fully grammaticalized definite article. Contact with Canaanite then seems to be the likeliest explanation for the appearance of the *h-*article in Old Arabic.

While the *h-* article is the commonest form in Old Arabic, whence the *ʔal* form? The *ʔal* article appears to be a later development from the original *han* article, through two irregular sound changes: *h* > *ʔ* and *n* > *l*.¹⁴ The former is well attested in Arabic (e.g. the causative *ʔaCCaCa* from *haCCaCa*), while the latter is not uncommon in loans (e.g. *finḡān* vs. *finḡāl* ‘cup’). The *ʔal* article appears to have developed in the western dialects of Old Arabic, attested first in the Nile Delta (cf. the famous *αλιλατ al-ʔilat* ‘the goddess’ mentioned in Herodotus, *Histories* I: 131), and is the regular form of the article in the dialect of the Nabataeans,

¹⁴The origins of the *al-*article are discussed in detail in Al-Jallad (forthcoming).

who were situated in ancient Edom, stretching south to the Ḥiḡāz. The *ʔal*-article is attested sporadically at Dadān in the western Ḥiḡāz as well. Based on the inscriptional record, the *ʔal*-article was a typical linguistic feature of settled, rather than nomadic groups, being attested most frequently in the Nabataean dialect, and in cities and oases like Petra and Ḥegrā. The nomads used a variety of definite article forms. It was perhaps not until the rise of Islam, and the resulting prestige given to official Arabic of the Umayyad state, that the *ʔal* article began to dominate at the expense of other forms.

3.2 The feminine ending

In most modern Arabic dialects, the feminine ending **-at* is realized as *-a(h)* in all contexts except the construct state, where it retains its original form *-at*. In Classical Arabic, it is *-at* in all situations, except for in utterance-final position, where it is realized as *-ah*. The Quranic Consonantal Text resembles the situation in the modern dialects, as do the transitional Nabataeo-Arabic and sixth-century Arabic script inscriptions (Nehmé 2017). Yet, if we go back further to the first century CE, it seems that varieties of Arabic written in the Hismaic and Safaitic script never experienced the sound change *-at* > *-ah* in any position – the feminine ending is always written as <t>. In the Arabic of the Nabataeans, however, the sound change of *-at* to *-ah* seems to have operated as early as the third century BCE (Al-Jallad 2017: §5.2.1).

The sound change *-at* > *-ah* is common in the Central Semitic languages, but the distribution can vary. In Phoenician, it applies to verbs but not nouns, while in Hebrew it applies equally to nouns and verbs (Huehnergard & Rubin 2011: 265–266). The most common Arabic distribution matches Aramaic: it applies to nouns but not verbs. I would suggest that, since this sound change is first attested in a dialect of Arabic for which we have abundant evidence of heavy contact with Aramaic, it is likely a contact-induced change (see also van Putten, this volume). Contact, or the lack thereof, may explain its absence in the ancient nomadic dialects, where, as we have seen above, there is little evidence for contact with Aramaic. Thus, like the *ʔal* article, the *-at* to *-ah* change would have been a typical feature of Arabic dialects of settled groups in the pre-Islamic period. In later forms of Arabic, the change spreads even to nomadic dialects, as we find it operational today across the Arabian Peninsula. Yet, the chronology of this diffusion is not quite clear. In an important study by van Putten (2017), the Dosiri dialect of Kuwait appears to preserve the archaic situation where the feminine ending is realized as *-at* in all positions.

4 Conclusion

Contact must be factored into our understanding of language change for Arabic at every attested stage. A summary of the facts above show that Arabic was in most intense contact with Aramaic, a situation that persisted for over a millennium prior to the rise of Islam, which may explain the high number of Aramaic loanwords into Arabic, and indeed some striking structural parallels, such as the distribution of the sound change *-at > -ah*. At the same time, there is very little evidence for contact with Sabaic (Old South Arabian), a contact situation only represented by a small number of mixed texts. This nicely matches the absence of South Arabian influence on Old Arabic and later forms of the language, with the exception of those dialects spoken in southwest Arabia.

Further reading

- Al-Jallad (2018b) provides a comprehensive outline of the languages and scripts of pre-Islamic North Arabia.
- Macdonald (2003) gives a description of the multilingual environment of ancient Nabataea.
- Nehmé (2010) outlines the development of the Arabic script based on the newest Nabataeo-Arabic inscriptions from Northwest Arabia.
- Stein (2018) gives an outline of the use of Aramaic in pre-Islamic Arabia.

Abbreviations

1, 2, 3	1st, 2nd, 3rd person	INF	infinitive
ACC	accusative	M	masculine
ACT	active	NOM	nominative
AOR	aorist	PASS	passive
BCE	before Common Era	PL	plural
c.	century	PN	proper noun
CE	Common Era	PREP	preposition
CONJ	conjunction	PRF	perfect (suffix conjugation)
DEF	definite	PTCP	participle
DEM	demonstrative	REL	relative
F	feminine	SG	singular
IMPF	imperfect (prefix conjugation)	VOC	vocative

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