On the Origin of Arabic Script

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Abstract. For the past two centuries, scholars have debated the origin of Arabic script, the youngest of the Semitic scripts. While one camp pointed to Nabatean as the sure ancestor, another favored Syriac instead. By examining the each ancestor visually and historically, one finds evidence for each point of view. Is it reasonable to insist on a single ancestor for Arabic script? The historical examples of Proto-Sinaitic and Ugaritic scripts demonstrate that a single script can be shown to have features amalgamated from more than one source. Detailed examination of the features of early Arabic script leads us to conclude that both Nabatean and Syriac strongly influenced its development. Finally, we demonstrate that particular details of cursive linking in Arabic script replicate analogous behavior in Syriac.

The origin of Arabic script has been much discussed and disputed in the last two centuries. Scholarly opinion is divided primarily into two camps: one says Arabic script descends from Nabatean, while the other points at Syriac. In the 9th century, the Arab historian, al-Baladhuri, recounted that three men from the tribe of Tayy had fashioned Arabic script "in a manner like Syriac" (Al-Baladhuri, 1969). About one thousand years later in 1865, orientalist T. Nöldeke published his study which concluded that Arabic writing descended from Nabatean script (Grohmann, 1971). About one hundred years later, semiticist J. Starcky argued in favor of Syriac because of its structural resemblance to Arabic script (Starcky, 1966). In 1993, arabist B. Gründler published her doctoral work at Harvard University in which she collected exhaustive material to demonstrate a gradual progression from Nabatean writing to early Arabic writing (Gründler, 1993). This publication displays the variety of glyph forms for each letter of the Nabatean alphabet in its long transition to Arabic script (Fig. 1). It is interesting to note that when Gründler later wrote the section on Arabic script in the Encyclopedia of the Qur'an (Gründler, 2001), she stated that Arabic writing was also likely

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influenced by Syriac calligraphy. A few years later, Gründler stated that "...the Nabatean script (attested 100 BCE-350 CE) was the genetic ancestor of the current Arabic alphabet" (Gründler, 2006).

In 1997, semiticist F. Briquel-Chatonnet entered the discourse in favor of Syriac, arguing strongly against the primary use of individual glyph shapes to demonstrate a relationship between scripts (Briquel-Chatonnet, 1997). She asserted that writing systems need to be compared by their overall look on the page, while also taking into consideration historical and cultural factors such as the status and prestige associated with each script. A script must essentially be examined as a whole system and not merely as a collection of glyphs. Briquel-Chatonnet points out some important visual differences between Nabatean and Syriac. In terms of alignment, Nabatean characters appear to be suspended from a common horizontal line, with the lower part of the letters uneven. On the other hand, Syriac letters are sitting on a common base line, along which the letters are also connected. In terms of proportions, Nabatean characters can be characterized as being taller than wider, while the Syriac letters are mostly wide with a few tall strokes here and there. Figure 2 demonstrates the visual contrast between the two scripts by showing a Nabatean papyrus from the 2nd century CE (Starcky, 1954) opposite a Syriac parchment in informal style from the 3rd century CE (Teixidor, 1990).

When it comes to scholarly discourse about the origins of a script, the use of terms such as "genetic," "descendant," and "ancestor" imply a sole family-line view of each script. But, can't the traits of a script be adopted from more than one source? Ugaritic script is a superlative example of a hybrid script developed by deriving traits from various scripts and amalgamating them (Fig. 3). Its inventor adopted its phonetic repertoire of 27 consonants, as well as their alphabetic order, from a similar Semitic language, while developing their shapes using components of Mesopotamian cuneiform writing (Pardee, 2012). Ugaritic script cannot be called the descendant of a sole script, but we can see that its elements evidently hark back to at least two sources. Although many scripts have slowly undergone changes over a long period of time, a few—such as Ugaritic—were created in a relatively short time through the deliberate mixing of traits. Proto-Sinaitic script, the first consonantal alphabet, falls also into that category; its inventor borrowed from the shapes of Egyptian characters, while naming the resulting letters to reflect their phonetic values in a Semitic language—a brilliant amalgamation of traits. Also, we should not neglect the fact that this inventor had to first identify all the consonants of the language, which in itself is a grand feat of linguistic insight.

With regard to the basic letter shapes of early Arabic writing, J.F. Healey has amply demonstrated that many of them show similarity to both Nabatean and Syriac shapes (Healey, 2000), although several cannot be readily derived from Syriac. Such an observation should not be surprising because both scripts ultimately derive from Imperial Aramaic, albeit through different paths.

L. Nehmé has written extensively about more recently discovered samples of a script she dubs "Nabateo-Arabic" that is "neither Nabatean nor Arabic but somewhere on its way between the two" (Nehmé, 2017). Dating to the 4th and 5th centuries, these writings show "some letters [that] are more still reminiscent of their equivalent in calligraphic Nabatean or are still 'on their way' to Arabic". Nehmé further asserts that "sometime between the end the 5th century and the end of the 6th century," the forms of Arabic letters were standardized, possibly through the influence of Syriac writing.

In their early form, many of the Arabic letters were polyvalent; i.e., each letter could represent several sounds. For instance, the letter Jim bearing no dots as in modern orthography—represented [ğ], [h], or [h]. Such polyvalence clearly made reading more difficult since the reader had to determine the appropriate sound for each letter based on the word, together with the broader context. More importantly, it demonstrates that Arabic writing—at the time—was based on another alphabet that supported fewer consonants. The 22-letter repertoire of Nabatean was based on that of Aramaic, while Arabic possessed 28 consonants. In order to represent 28 phonemes with 22 letters, some ambiguity was bound to result. With a repertoire of 23 letters, Syriac would not have done much better. On the other hand, had the Arabic repertoire been based on the ample set of 29 Ancient South Arabian consonants, it would have been an adequate fit (Nebes and Stein, 2004). However, the paths of these two scripts do not seem to have crossed.

One emblematic trait of Syriac writing does not appear to have been mentioned by the literature related to the origin of Arabic script. Syriac writing is cursive in the sense that all letters of a word link to each other along the horizontal base line. While this behavior is true in general, a subset of the letters does not conform to it. Of the 23 letters of the Syriac alphabet, eight link to their neighbor on the right, but never link on the left, even in mid word. This set of eight consists of the following letters: Alaf (²), Dalat (d), He (h), Waw (w), Sade (§), Zayn (z), Rish (r), Taw (t).

In Arabic, five of the eight phonetically equivalent letters demonstrate this same linking behavior: Alef $({}^{\circ})$, Dal (d), Reh (r), Zayn (z), Waw (w). One might puzzle, was this behavior borrowed from Syriac into Arabic, or the contrary? In either case, it seems most unlikely that such an unusual pattern common to two scripts would have come about accidentally. The written record shows partial evidence of such behavior in Syriac as far back as the 3rd century CE (Teixidor, 1990). By the time the Syriac codex manuscripts appeared in the 5th century, the formal *estrangela* style of Syriac had matured and become standardized. G. Kiraz has demonstrated that by then, this linking behavior had become the norm, placing it long before Arabic script had reached full development (Kiraz, 2012). Figure 4 shows examples of this linking behavior in a Syriac manuscript (dated 464 CE), while figures 5 and 6 shows parallel examples in early Arabic inscriptions, one dating to 568 CE, and the other to 677 CE.

Is it not possible that both Nabatean and Syriac contributed to the formation of Arabic script at various stages? Is the discourse about script origin perhaps too steeped in assumptions that hinder an objective examination of the subject? In The Shape of Script, R. Salomon describes the slow, gradual changes that a script can undergo as a "constant natural process of evolution" (Salomon, 2012). Among other terms commonly used in the context of script are "descendant," "ancestor," and "genetic"—all biological terms. The terms we use certainly have an influence on our thinking. In real life, we know that a cat cannot be crossbred with a horse. Might we be unwittingly extending this type of reasoning to scripts? And yet, we know that scripts are *not* living entities. They are symbolic systems invented by human minds primarily to keep records and to represent spoken language. The transformation of a script, as observed over time, can resemble the slow adaptations of living beings, but in reality, they vary visually only as a result of the human tendency to introduce change. There is nothing "natural"—in the biological sense— about the changes that a script undergoes. At each stage, humans slowly vary the shapes that they write, gradually resulting in long-term changes.

In conclusion, we must weigh the evidence regarding the origin of Arabic script.

With the body of evidence on each side—i.e., Nabatean and Syriac, the scales do not tip readily in favor of a single, exclusive source for Arabic script. The alphabetic repertoire of Arabic script is evidently of Nabatean origin, while at some later time, its letter shapes and its connecting behavior were probably influenced by Syriac. The inscription at Zabad (Fig. 7) is written in three languages (Syriac, Greek, and Arabic), indicating the close coexistence of multiple scripts in the Levant (Grohmann, 1971). It is most reasonable then to conclude that the traits of Arabic script have at least two sources, Nabatean and Syriac.

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FIGURE 1. Visual contrast of two early manuscripts: Nabatean (previous page), Syriac (this page)



FIGURE 2. Samples of the letter Mīm, from Nabatean to early Arabic (Gründler, 1993)

⊷	ŢŢ	Ĭ	ŧ	Ш	Ш
?a	b	g	ḫ(x)	d	h
Þ≁	Ŧ	H(H (Ħ	Þ
w	z	ḥ (ħ)	ţ	у	k
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FIGURE 3. An abecedary of Ugaritic script

rish alaf heh waw dalat zayn tau

FIGURE 4. Examples of Syriac letters that do not link to their left neighbor, British Library (Add MS 14425)



FIGURE 5. Examples of Arabic letters that do not link to their left neighbor, Inscription from near Harrān (Southeastern Turkey) dated 568 CE



FIGURE 6. Inscription from Ta'if (Arabia) dated 677 CE



FIGURE 7. The Zabad Inscription (dated 512 CE), near Aleppo. Text shown in parallel lines of Syriac, Greek, and Arabic [The Arabic text has been retraced below for clarity]