

Roots of Modern Arabic Script: From Musnad to Jazm

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Introduction

Studying the origins of the Arabic script is an important and interesting undertaking since it is not merely a history topic. Understanding how Arabic evolved to its current forms is an important step to secure its future. Arabic script open interaction with its surrounding environment in the past should be an inspiration today.

For many centuries, scholars of the Muslim world differed on the origin of the script, but their differences were mainly about what group of Arab tribes had used it first. It was not until modern inscriptions hinted at an Aramaic Nabataean link that this topic became divisive. Since then, a lot of articles and books had debated the subject. Many of these articles and books simply repeated the conclusions of western scholars of the nineteenth century, based on a handful of inscriptions, about a Nabataean transformation to Arabic, without engaging any discussion. Few, like Mādūn, challenged this notion with serious and interesting analysis and reasoning. He speculated with illustrative details about a possible transformation of older Arabic Musnad shapes to modern ones, instead.¹⁸ However, many books and articles, today, disagree with the Aramaic Nabataean origin theory without offering a solid alternative theory.

In this article, I will not attempt to study each early inscription in detail since this cannot be covered in one brief essay. However, I will not restate theories without proper analysis, either. In addition to a brief discussion of the inscriptions available today, I will examine various important factors surrounding the birth of early Arabic script. Speculating about letter shapes of a few inscriptions alone does not constitute an adequate systematic methodology to drawing definite conclusions. One should study the origins of the Arabic script within the context of the overall scriptural, sociological, and geographical realities of the old Near East region at that time.

Early Alphabets in the Near East

The earliest bits and pieces of an alphabet in the greater Arabian Peninsula, including the Fertile Crescent, were found in the eastern Mediterranean region located between ancient Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and Egypt. They were dated back to the 14th century BC. Collectively, these ancient shapes and forms were referred to as the Canaanite alphabet which was said to be derived from proto-Sinaitic scripts of Egyptian origin. It is commonly believed today that this Canaanite alphabet is the progenitor of most major alphabets of the old world.³⁶

In the same area and during the same time period, scientists have also uncovered evidence for the existence of another important alphabet system used by the Canaanites:

the Ugaritic alphabet of the city state of Ugarit near Rās Shamrah in northern Syria. The Ugaritic script had a long alphabet with 30 letters and a short one with 22 letters. All letters had Mesopotamian cuneiform shapes and were mainly ordered from left to right. It is not clear whether Ugaritic was a special adaptation of an Egyptian related Canaanite alphabet or an earlier alphabet of Mesopotamian origin.

Inscriptions can not always determine, with absolute certainty, precise timelines of ancient scripts. One can not always conclude from a few found inscriptions when a specific script had started. However, it is safe to assume based on inscriptions that around the 9th and early 10th centuries BC, two well-formed alphabets with many common shapes and similar overall look and feel had existed in the greater Arabian Peninsula.

One was the Phoenician alphabet of the eastern Mediterranean shores, which scholars think was directly derived from earlier Canaanite or even a transformed replacement of it. The second was the Arabic Musnad alphabet of the Arabian Peninsula including ancient Yemen, which most experts believe was a more developed kin of the Canaanite script, not Phoenician. Inscriptions further reveal that over a century later another alphabet, Aramaic, clearly a variant of Phoenician, was in use throughout the Fertile Crescent area and may be Persia.

Early Arabic	ل ر ذ س ه و ز ح ط ق ك م ن س ع و ص و د و ش ج ح ذ س ه ط ب ع
Saba'i Musnad	ح ن ط ق ي و ز ح ط ق ك م ن س ع و ص و د و ش ج ح ذ س ه ط ب ع
Phoenician	כ ג א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ ק ר ש ת
Aramaic	א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ ק ר ש ת
Early Greek	Α Β Γ Δ Ε Ζ Η Θ Ι Κ Λ Μ Ν Ξ Ο Π Ρ Σ Τ Χ Υ Φ Ω

Table of rough shapes of characters for few early alphabets

Some experts believe that the Phoenician script was derived from Arabic Musnad. German historian, Max Muller (1823-1900) thought it was adapted from Musnad during the 9th century B.C. when the Minaean Kingdom of Yemen controlled areas of the Eastern Mediterranean shores. Syrian scholar of the 19th century, Shakīb 'Arsalān shares this view.¹⁸ Because of the shape similarity of several Greek and Musnad letters, some experts even believe that Greek was derived from Musnad too! After all, it is a known fact that ancient Greece had extensive trade relations with Yemen going back to the 9th century B.C. Moreover, unlike Phoenician, which was exclusively right to left script, Musnad was bidirectional which may explain Greek's left to right ordering or even the ancient Boustrophedon practice of bidirectional writing.

Needless to say, there are few who argued that Musnad could have been adapted from Phoenician as well, during the Minaean times, but the restricted ordering of characters in Phoenician makes this less likely. Still, regardless of their exact starting dates and origins, the undisputed archeological fact is that Musnad and Phoenician had clear common roots

and shapes. Furthermore, the earliest inscriptions of clear matured forms for both scripts belong to the same time period, around the 9th to 10th centuries B.C.

The emergence of Cursive styles

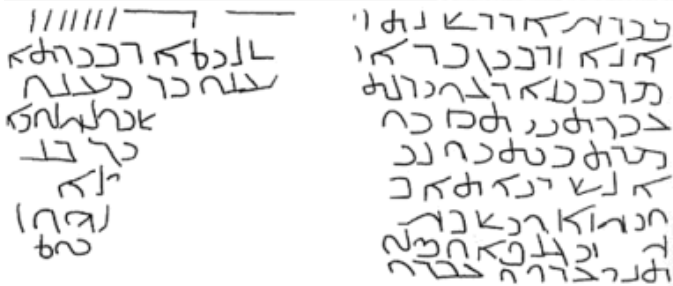
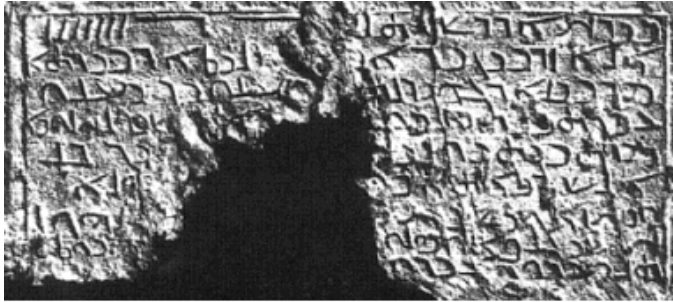
Around the 3rd to 4th century B.C., inscriptions of the Near East further showed that Aramaic and its various derived scripts had replaced Phoenician, becoming the main script of the Fertile Crescent. Inscriptions also show that a semi cursive script, sharing with Aramaic its 22 letters and most shapes, was widely used by several population centers in the southern areas of greater Syria. This was the script of the ancient city of Petra, capital of the Nabataean kingdom, which was founded around the 3rd century B.C. The Nabataeans were predominantly Arab Semitic tribes living in the area controlling trade routes from the eastern Mediterranean shores to Hijāz (Saudi Arabia) and Yemen. Evidently, they have adapted a script with a slightly modified Aramaic shapes after centuries of economic relations with neighboring urban centers.⁸



A Nabataean inscription on the walls of Petra ³²



Syriac inscription of the Tripod Mosaic discovered by Segal in Urfa, Turkey. Dated to the 3rd century ³⁰



Earliest Syriac inscription dated 6 A.D. 12

Many scholars believe the Nabataean script was derived from Syriac around the 2nd century B.C., but no evidence supports this claim. While the Nabataean inscriptions can be photographed today on the walls of ancient Petra, dated back to the 3rd century B.C., the earliest inscriptions of the Syriac script are from the 1st century. Syriac, like Nabataean is clearly derived from Aramaic. It was first used in Odessa, currently Urfa of southern Turkey. ¹²

By the 3rd and 4th centuries, it seems that the practice of connecting letter forms was becoming popular in the greater Peninsula and Persia. This trend was most likely the result of the introduction of newer inscription media and tools. Without a doubt, connectivity marked a new era in script development. It transformed ancient scripts the same way complete detachment transformed modern scripts in the age of typography. Cursive writing necessitated radical letters shapes changes. Letters were flipped, rotated, extended, or completely replaced to adhere to the new cursive rules. The new words absorbed the visual characteristics of individual letters. Scripts that traditionally utilized open letter ordering, like Musnad, assumed one direction in their cursive styles.²⁷

Within this new cursive environment, scripts adjusted differently. Some, like the Nabataean script, adapted full connectivity but kept most letter forms unaltered. Others changed their letter forms radically for the sake of connectivity, like cursive Musnad in Yemen and may be Pahlavi of Persia. Yet other scripts, like Hebrew, ignored this new trend all together.² The dynamics of script evolution in that period was a classical case of how the new emerges from the old. It was a case of dialectic interaction between the new and old.

The development of any script is not a linear or precise process. Because of this nonlinearity and uncertainty, scientific research and studies regarding a script origin should involve elements of investigation, speculation, and a probabilistic approach.

Scripts rarely develop in an isolated environment or by decree. Instead, they evolve through adaptation to surrounding scripts and actual socioeconomic materialistic needs. Under normal circumstances, people do not abandon their writing systems abruptly in favor of another.

The Greater Arabian Peninsula before Islam

Prior to investigating a script origin, one should first establish what a derived script is. Identification should take into account the number of letters used and their dynamic and visual characteristics. Comparing few letter shapes alone is not enough to identify a script origin. One should study a script development within its surrounding sociological and geographical environment. A new script can be derived from multiple scripts not only a specific one. It can also be invented a new from scratch.

In the early centuries of the first millennium, the northern area of the greater Arabian Peninsula was a land of several old and new religions. Babylonia, once the undisputed cultural center in the region, was under the Persian Sassanid rule while the eastern Mediterranean coast was controlled by the Romans. In contrast, the regions of middle and south Arabia enjoyed a more homogeneous religious environment. They were free of direct foreign dominance. Still, despite sporadic presence of ancient Hebrews, Christians, and Mandaeans in the northern urban centers, the majority of the inhabitants of the Greater Arabian Peninsula, including the Fertile Crescent, were pagans. Like the people of Persia, they did not fully embrace monotheism until after the emergence of Islam

The Arab tribes of the heartland were not isolated from the religiously turbulent north though. Traditionally, Arab tribes enjoyed strong ties with each other no matter where they settled. Historically these tribes roamed large areas extending to the upper Tigris and Euphrates. In the course of their movement, they had not only connected various civilizations in the region, but also created new urban centers of their own. Many had settled throughout the Fertile Crescent centuries before the Christian era, bringing north their gods, language, and script styles. The migration north continued unabated for centuries, even after Islam. Arabic speaking Muslim armies moving north during the 7th century were at home in most population centers of Iraq and greater Syria. Many welcomed them.

It is true that on the advent of Islam, the Aramaic derived scripts were thoroughly established in most of the Fertile Crescent cities, but unlike older scripts of the area, like Sumerian and Phoenician, these derived scripts had limited applications. Many were primarily religious scripts. The day-to-day scripts for business and government were those of the occupying foreign powers. During this period, more and more religions differentiated themselves from each other by the creation of newer derived scripts to write their religious books. Mandaeans, Manicheans, Christians, Zoroastrians and Hebrews all had their religious scripts.

Under foreign forces, the Fertile Crescent region was no longer a central player internationally. Non native ruling forces, namely the Persians and Romans, dominated the area culturally and economically. For the Arabs, however, one positive aspect had resulted from this environment: the treasures of the Persian and Roman civilizations were now within direct reach of the heartland of Arabia.

The development of the new Arabic script, probably in the early centuries of the first millennium, should be studied within this diverse environment. Scripts with visually sophisticated curves like Pahlavi and Avesta were now in nearby Mesopotamia.²³ Greek, and Aramaic scripts like Nabataean, Syriac, and Mandaean were just north of Hijaz. Although Arabic Musnad and its derived styles continued to be the main script of northern Najd (Saudi Arabia) and Hijāz, it was not the only one anymore. Within this pluralistic environment, the new developing Arabic script must have been affected by more than one script style.

Birth and development of the Arabic Script

The earliest style of the modern Arabic script, historically known as al-Jazm, was a product of its surrounding environment the same way newer scripts and re-invented ones became the product of an Arabic script dominated environment after Islam when Arabic became an inspirational force. During centuries of Arabic prominence, many older writing systems did not simply vanish. While their use was naturally diminishing, many had survived and have adapted to Arabic. Some were re-invented in the spirit of Arabic the same way Arabic was re-invented in the spirit of their original forms earlier. Researchers should not view the shapes of non Arabic scripts of the Muslim world today completely outside the frames of the Arabic script. It is not conceivable that the surviving Aramaic scripts were completely immune to the Arabic script environment after the Islamic era.

An outcome of doing otherwise was that some scholars believed that early Arabic may have been derived from Syriac or one of its closely related scripts of the early centuries, like Mandaic, Manichean, or Palmyrene. However, many inscriptions in that period revealed that Syriac, like early Nabataean, and Palmyrene, was not decidedly cursive.³¹ &
³¹ A multilingual inscription dated as late as 512 CE, from the heartland of the Syriac script, Zabad, showed mostly isolated Syriac letter forms, side by side Greek and fully cursive Arabic. Early Syriac inscriptions showed no signs of diacritic marks or dots, either. Arabic-like cursive and dotted Peshitta manuscripts in Syriac Estrangelo script, believed to be from the 5th century, are more likely from the Islamic Era. Still, from an evolutionary perspective, the Syriac scripts should be thought of as genuine sisters of modern Arabic.

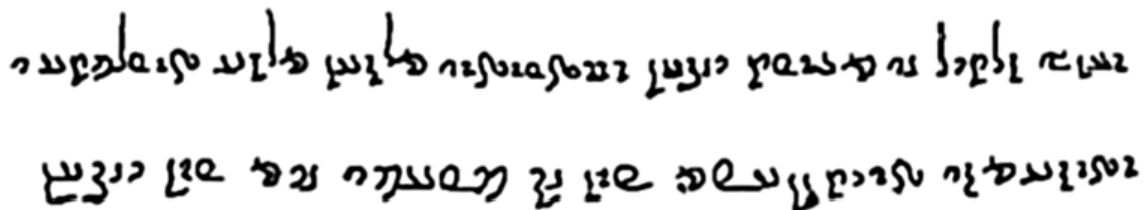
The argument above is also valid regarding further claims that early Arabic may have been derived from one of the highly artistic Persian scripts used in Mesopotamia during centuries of Sassanid rule.⁹ One can not deny that the leap of Arabic to its magnificent shapes during the Abbasid dynasty have Persian artistic spirit all over it. This is expected

since Iraq which was the melting pot center of the Abbasids was under direct Persian rule from the 3rd century and had continued its heavy association with the Persian culture after Islam.



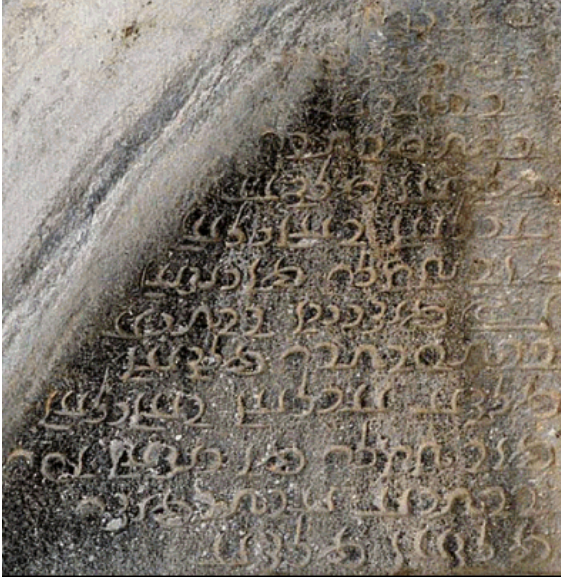
Pre-Islamic trilingual inscription of Zabad found near Aleppo, Syria, including Syriac (top left), Greek (top right) and Arabic (bottom) scripts. Dated 512 CE.²⁸ Arabic text is isolated below and traced for clarity.

However, the evolution of Arabic should not be confused with its origin. Inscriptions of Pahlavi and Avesta in the early centuries of the first millennium show sophisticated curves, seamlessness, and rhythm that may have affected early Arabic letterforms.³ Then again, while both scripts showed more tendency to connect letter forms than early Syriac, their connectivity was also a reluctant one. They surely did not share with the newly developing Arabic its major defining dynamics.



Kartirz Avesta inscription found on the Kabah of Zartusht. Dated to the 3rd Century.⁵

In the tenth century, Ibn al-Nadīm, a well-known Muslim librarian and historian whose background we shall present later, described several old and new Persian scripts. His sketches of letters shapes of some of the surviving ones in his time were not that of their original forms. Most sketches showed curves resembling those of old Pahlavi but forms similar to those of Persian Nasta’līq style. Referring to an earlier version of one such script, he called Firamuz, which is sometimes cited as the Arabic-like Persian script predating Arabic, Ibn al-Nadīm explained that it “was derived and wrote by the Persians. It is a recent development in two forms.” His statement clearly indicates that this Arabic derived Persian script came later.²²



Taq e-Bostan Pehlavi inscription of Shapur III. Dated to late 3rd Century 36

Still, some theories on the origin of Arabic may support a possible early Persian influence. Many believe that the Arabic script was first used in the Ḥīrah and ʿAnbār area of Iraq which was under the Persian rule during that period. Many talk about al-Kindī script style of Ḥīrah existing side by side al-Jazm of Ḥijāz.¹ Some of the theories explored by Ibn al-Nadīm even listed pre-Islamic Arabic names from that same area who supposedly designed the early forms.

It is commonly believed today that Bushr ibn ʿAbd al- Malik al-Kindī, believed to be a Christian Arab, was the first to bring Jazm from Ḥīrah to Mecca.¹⁶ Bushr was the brother of al-Ukaydir, a leader from ancient Dumat al-Jandal (outside Sakākah of northern Saudi Arabia) that is located 200 miles southwest of Ḥīrah. Dumat al-Jandal is the earliest known northern Arab city dating back to the 10th century B.C.³⁶ At that time, during the 5th - 6th centuries, it was the capital of the Arab kingdom of Kinda. Below is a rough translation of a pre Islamic poem, attributed to a man from Mecca or Dumat al-Jandal, 18 which is widely referenced in Arabic literature:

Do not deny Bushr's* favors to you
He was a man of open blessed wisdom

(* Bushr ibn ʿAbd al-Malik)

He brought you al-Jazm calligraphy until you saved
the money that was plenty and scattered

You then moved the pens back and forth
as skilful as scribes of Kisrá* and Qaysar*

(* Sassanid and Roman Emperors)

And had no need to Musnad of father Ḥimyr*
and whatever the Himyrite* kings wrote on pages

(* Father of Yemen Himyrite tribes)

Roots of Jazm: Nabataean or Musnad?

However, today, most scholars believe that Jazm had evolved during the 4th century from the Nabataean script. Nevertheless, a thorough examination of early inscriptions mostly point to other roots. The author believes that the early Arabic script, Jazm, was independently developed by the Arab tribes settling north of Ḥijāz, and Najd from localized versions of cursive Musnad, particularly the Ṣafawī style, much earlier than the 4th century. After all, early Jazm shares with Musnad its exact 28 letters. It also shares with it an early use of multiple shapes per letter that became widely utilized later. It even used several Musnad shapes without major modifications. Jazm may have coexisted with and influenced by more prominent Aramaic scripts in its vicinity and particularly Nabataean. However Jazm approach to connectivity and shapes was quite different.

The way cursive Jazm flow along a horizontal line is unique. It lays letters shapes horizontally employing smoother curves and even alternative shapes. It has a connectivity style and rhythm that can be better identified with that of cursive Musnad than cursive Nabataean and it shares with it the use of extended horizontal strokes. In fact, while Nabataean connects vertical letters as is, cursive Musnad transforms them before joining. With a stretch of imagination, some Nabataean shapes can be made to resemble those of Jazm, but so do many Musnad shapes. Still, as stated earlier, shapes similarity is not the only indication of script origin especially since Nabataean, Aramaic, and Musnad, share the same roots.

In Arabic, the word Musnad means “supported” but in the context of script, it means monumental or vertically standing. Like Phoenician and Aramaic, Musnad was written with isolated unique letter shapes, and despite occasional multi ordering, it was primarily a right to left script. Centuries later, also like them, Musnad had witnessed the introduction of few distinct derived styles. Most notable were the northern Lihyani and Ṣafawī, and nomadic Thamūdī. It is a common mistake today to treat Musnad as a single style, Saba’ī, limited by single geographic area: south Arabia. Musnad was as prominent and alive in the north as it was in the south.

Inscriptions dated back to the 3rd century show advanced cursive Musnad forms clearly illustrating its flexibility and visual adaptation. This highly cursive script, also known as South Arabian Minuscules or popular Musnad, was utilized by ancient Yemenis to inscribe everyday documents on softer wooden sticks. Standard Musnad was primarily used for rock-cut monumental inscriptions.²⁷ Clearly, Musnad was not “fixed on stone” while its relatives in the north evolved into a variety of other forms. Certainly, the development of a northern Musnad cursive style can not be ruled out.

To the Arabs of Ḥijāz and the rest of the greater Arabian Peninsula, Yemen was always the heartland of Arabia. In 615 C.E, when Prophet Muhammad wanted to protect his followers from prosecution in Mecca, he ordered them south toward Yemen and Ḥabashah, modern Ethiopia. Just as Yemen was (and still is) the Arab genealogical reference, its script was their reference script wherever they settled. The Arabs carried

with them not only their language and gods but also their script. While exposure to old script among the tribes had probably diminished the further they moved north, away from their original population centers, writing had most likely regained the central stage after the development of newer population centers extending as far north as the upper Euphrates River.



Cursive Arabic Musnad transcription on wooden stick in ancient Yemen. Dated early 3rd century 27

Like the word Musnad, the word al-Jazm most definitely had a direct script-related meaning. In fact, several pre Islamic poems had mentioned both names. In an Arabic dictionary the verb jazza means “to cut from” which indicates that the derived noun Jazm must have referred to a script being cut from another probably by simplification and letter shapes reduction. This fits exactly what Jazm did in relation to Musnad.

Jazm carries clear markings of an original independent script. Most likely, the northern Arab inventors of Jazm were familiar with Nabataean, a prominent script in the area, but at the same time, they were even more familiar with Musnad. Inscriptions show that they have used it during the Nabataean period. Even though some northern tribes had adapted Nabataean Aramaic shapes, the majority of the northern Arab tribes continued using Musnad. Monumental Musnad was widely inscribed on Arabian gods from Yemen to Palmyra. The evidence is clear; Musnad writings were on both early Jazm and late Nabataean inscriptions. In fact, Musnad was utilized until the early years of Islam.

Evidently, the development of Jazm was a continuous process spanning over several centuries. Early inscriptions before and after the emergence of Islam included both isolated and attached forms of the same letters. It seems that Jazm had only matured after the emergence of the Kufic style. Although this style is named after Kufa in modern Iraq, inscriptions dated to 4 Hijrī calender (625 CE) show that it was used in Medina first. Like other religious groups around them, the Muslims apparently wanted to designate a unique style for the writing of their book, the Qurʻān. The fact that the Arabic writing system

matured only after the Islamic era is natural. Most scripts develop after being adapted in a state environment. In the pre Islamic era Arabic Jazm was clearly a developing script.

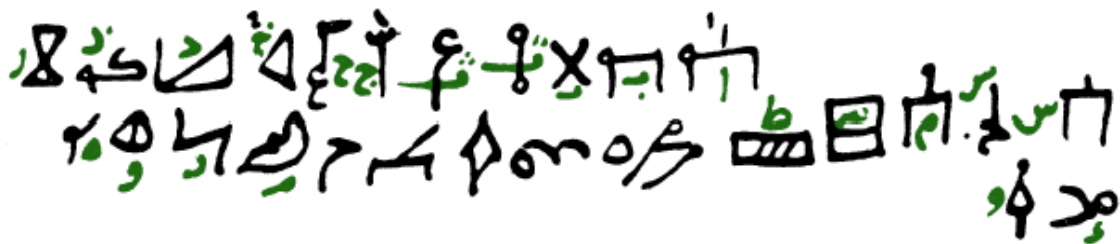
Work of Early Islamic Era Scholars

Before discussing the inscriptions discovered in modern days, it is important to examine works of early prominent Muslim scholars regarding Musnad and the origins of Jazm. Although Musnad was not used anymore after Islam, these scholars knew much about it prior to the western discoveries of the nineteenth century. Without a doubt, early Muslim scholars had access to more and better inscriptions than those we have today. While most had differed on the origins of Jazm as a writing style, it seems that they had taken it for granted that Jazm was of a Musnad background.

One such scholar is Ibn al-Nadīm (929 CE -996 CE), a librarian living in Baghdad during early second century of the Abbasid Caliphate. He had direct access to major libraries of his time, including rare manuscripts in the library of al-Ma'mūn palace. Nadīm's father was a successful book collector. In his introduction of al-Fihrast, a multi volume encyclopedic index of thousands of books and authors of that time, he explored different accounts regarding the origin of the Arabic script. While these accounts differed on details, all seemed to indicate that the script was invented by Arab tribes either in Hijaz, Najd, or other northern centers like Ḥīrah and 'Anbār.

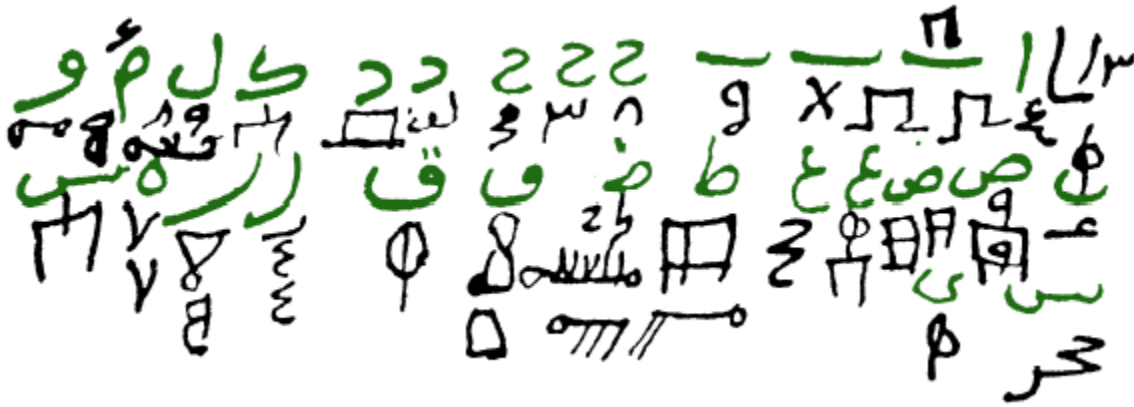
Before giving his personal account, Ibn al-Nadīm wrote that “Ḥimyar used to write with the Musnad script, with varied forms of Alīf, Bā', Tā'.” The Ḥimyar refer to the people of modern Yemen. Then, after explaining that he was put in charge of translating a Musnad manuscript from the Caliph al-Ma'mūn palace library, he sketched individual Musnad letters as he saw them indicating that they were an “exact reproduction of what was in the transcription.”²²

Immediately after presenting the Musnad shapes, he gave his personal opinion. He wrote that “The first of the Arab scripts was the script of Makkah, the Next of al-Madīnah, then of al-Baṣrah, then of al-Kūfah. For the Alifs of the scripts of Makkah and al-Madīnah there is a turning of the hand to the right and lengthening of strokes, one form having a slight slant”. He then gave an example.²²



Arabic Musnad alphabet as sketched by Ibn al-Nadīm (d 990 CE) in his book al-Fihrast written around 970 CE. Letters order is that of old Hijāz and Tihāmah which is almost identical to the one used today by Arabic dictionaries.²² Arabic letters highlighted in green by author for clarity.

Another well-known Muslim scholar, al-Hamadhānī, had also provided sketches of the Musnad alphabet in his book, al-ʿIklīl, which he wrote in 950 CE.¹⁸ His work confirmed Ibn al-Nadīm observation of the use of varied shapes per letter. In addition to Alīf, Bāʿ, and Tāʿ, he listed varied shapes for Rāʿ, Dhāʿ, Zāʿ, Lām, Mīm, Nūn, and Hāʿ. One interesting observation from his sketch was the use in Musnad of three position-dependent shapes for the letter Hāʿ. Modern inscriptions had confirmed most letters shapes of Musnad as observed by both scholars.



Arabic Musnad alphabet as sketched by al-Hamadhānī in his book al-ʿIklīl written around 945 CE.¹⁸ The Arabic letters are ordered here according to old Najd Arabic alphabet.²⁶ Arabic letters highlighted in green by author for clarity.

The smart note by Ibn al-Nadīm about right slanted Alīf was confirmed by all pre Islamic Arabic inscriptions dating back to the forth, fifth and Sixth centuries. The varied shapes of Musnad Alīf sketched by al-Hamadhānī had even included two such right slanted Alīfs. Also, the fact that the earliest Kufic inscriptions were found in Madīnah indicates a trend of northward script movement from Ḥijāz, which was Ibn al-Nadīm key observation. Considering their nomadic nature, this fact should not exclude the possibility that tribes elsewhere in the peninsula could have mastered the Ḥijāzī style of Jazm even before the arrival of Islam.

Several other prominent Muslim scholars believed Arabic Jazm was derived from Musnad. Among these was Ibn Khaldūn and al-Qalqashandī. They both wrote that Jazm was originally known in Yemen as al-Khaṭṭ al-Ḥimīrī and that it was brought later to the Ḥīrah and Anbār area of Iraq before it was brought to Makkah.¹⁸

Pre-Islamic Arabic Jazm Inscriptions

There are seven pre-Islamic Jazm inscriptions available to researchers today. The earliest one was found in Jabal al-Ramm east of Aqabah. It dates back to 328 CE. The next earliest inscriptions are the two found in Sakākah of northern Saudi Arabia. They were dated to the 4th or may be early 5th century. A possible second earliest inscription may also be the Arabic Umm al-Jimāl inscription found south of Damascus and dated to the 5th century.

Cursive	Arabic Musnad				Arabic Jazm	Nabataean
	Saba'i	Lihyani	Thamudi	Safawi		
ا	ا	ا ا ا ا	ا ا ا ا ا ا ا ا	ا ا ا ا ا ا	ا ا	ا ا ا
ب	ب	ب ب ب	ب ب ب ب ب ب	ب ب ب ب ب ب	ب ب	ب ب
ت	ت	ت ت ت	ت ت ت ت ت ت	ت ت ت ت ت ت	ت ت	ت ت
ث	ث	ث ث ث	ث ث ث ث ث ث	ث ث ث ث ث ث	ث ث	ث ث
ج	ج	ج ج ج	ج ج ج ج ج ج	ج ج ج ج ج ج	ج ج	ج ج
ح	ح	ح ح ح	ح ح ح ح ح ح	ح ح ح ح ح ح	ح ح	ح ح
خ	خ	خ خ خ	خ خ خ خ خ خ	خ خ خ خ خ خ	خ خ	خ خ
د	د	د د د	د د د د د د	د د د د د د	د د	د د
ذ	ذ	ذ ذ ذ	ذ ذ ذ ذ ذ ذ	ذ ذ ذ ذ ذ ذ	ذ ذ	ذ ذ
ر	ر	ر ر ر	ر ر ر ر ر ر	ر ر ر ر ر ر	ر ر	ر ر
ز	ز	ز ز ز	ز ز ز ز ز ز	ز ز ز ز ز ز	ز ز	ز ز
س	س	س س س	س س س س س س	س س س س س س	س س	س س
ش	ش	ش ش ش	ش ش ش ش ش ش	ش ش ش ش ش ش	ش ش	ش ش
ص	ص	ص ص ص	ص ص ص ص ص ص	ص ص ص ص ص ص	ص ص	ص ص
ض	ض	ض ض ض	ض ض ض ض ض ض	ض ض ض ض ض ض	ض ض	ض ض
ط	ط	ط ط ط	ط ط ط ط ط ط	ط ط ط ط ط ط	ط ط	ط ط
ظ	ظ	ظ ظ ظ	ظ ظ ظ ظ ظ ظ	ظ ظ ظ ظ ظ ظ	ظ ظ	ظ ظ
ع	ع	ع ع ع	ع ع ع ع ع ع	ع ع ع ع ع ع	ع ع	ع ع
غ	غ	غ غ غ	غ غ غ غ غ غ	غ غ غ غ غ غ	غ غ	غ غ
ف	ف	ف ف ف	ف ف ف ف ف ف	ف ف ف ف ف ف	ف ف	ف ف
ق	ق	ق ق ق	ق ق ق ق ق ق	ق ق ق ق ق ق	ق ق	ق ق
ك	ك	ك ك ك	ك ك ك ك ك ك	ك ك ك ك ك ك	ك ك	ك ك
ل	ل	ل ل ل	ل ل ل ل ل ل	ل ل ل ل ل ل	ل ل	ل ل
م	م	م م م	م م م م م م	م م م م م م	م م	م م
ن	ن	ن ن ن	ن ن ن ن ن ن	ن ن ن ن ن ن	ن ن	ن ن
ه	ه	ه ه ه	ه ه ه ه ه ه	ه ه ه ه ه ه	ه ه	ه ه
و	و	و و و	و و و و و و	و و و و و و	و و	و و
ي	ي	ي ي ي	ي ي ي ي ي ي	ي ي ي ي ي ي	ي ي	ي ي

Table of letter shapes of various Arabic Musnad styles and early Arabic Jazm of the greater Arabian Peninsula based on modern inscriptions, shown side by side Nabataean and modern Arabic letters. Compare Musnad to shapes revealed by early Abbasid scholars.

The remaining three inscriptions are all dated to the 6th century. The first one was found in Zabad of northern Syria, It was dated to 512 CE. It is a multilingual inscription including Greek, Syriac and Arabic. The second one was found near Jabal al-'Usays south of Damascus and dated to 528 CE. And the third one was found in Harrān, also south of Damascus and dated to 568 CE.

اد فسر بره كنده / الاوس
 اد سلسله الدب الملا على
 عسلم مسله سن
 ٤٥٦

Pre-Islamic Arabic Jazm inscription of Jabal al-'Usays found south of Damascus, Syria. Dated 528 C.E.²⁸ Year is highlighted in green.

ل س ح س ر ك ل م و س س د / المرقور
 س س ل ح و ك س ر ل م و س س د
 س س ل ح و ك س ر ل م و س س د

Pre-Islamic Arabic Jazm from a Greek-Arabic bilingual inscription found in Ḥarrān, south of Damascus, Syria. Dated 568 C.E.²⁸ Year is highlighted in green.

It is worth noting here that dating inscriptions is dependent on how scholars read their contents. Therefore, the above dates are not necessarily accurate. Only the inscriptions of 'Usays and Ḥarrān explicitly mentioned dates. Each date had two isolated parts following the word "Sanat" (Arabic for year.) Experts read the two parts combined in each as Nabataean numbers, 423 and 463, which can be questioned. First, looking from right to left, it was assumed that the first part in both referred to the number 400 despite clear visual difference of the two. The first part in Ḥarrān could be Nabataean number 200 or even the Arabic word "nahw" for "approximately". Second, one can not rule out the possibility that the last identical portion of the second parts could have been a reference to a year or event rather than the number 23, since, as we shall see later, this same final part will appear again in another Nabataean inscription. Fortunately, the date of the multilingual Zabād inscription was secured by the Greek inscription next to it.

Also worth noting here is that no pre Islamic Arabic inscription was found yet in the area around Ḥīrah and 'Anbār, in Iraq. The closest ones are those of Sakākah, approximately 200 miles southwest of Ḥīrah. The absence of inscriptions found in that area may indicate that there are indeed no inscriptions to be found there and that Jazm came later there. However, this is doubtful since many believe that Jazm was first used among the Arab tribes in that Area.

As for Nabataean, numerous inscriptions are available today dating as early as 3rd century BC, but only four, out of several thousands found, had Arabic language text. These are frequently presented as evidence that Jazm was derived from Nabataean. The earliest one

had only two Arabic text lines and it was found in Ein Avadat, present day Israel, and was dated to 88 – 150 CE. The second earliest is the Nabataean Umm al-Jimāl found south of Damascus. It was dated to 250 CE.

Then there is the Raqqūsh inscription found in Madāʿin Ṣāliḥ in northern Ḥijāz, Saudi Arabia. It was dated to 267 CE. This one had a summary in Thamūdī Musnad script. It also contained rarely seen dots for a few letters. Some see Raqqūsh as a proof for the transformation of Nabatean to Jazm. The third one is the famous Namārah inscription found south of Damascus. Allegedly, this was the stone placed on the tomb of ʿUmruʾ al-Qays (d.328), a well-known pre Islamic Arab king linked to the Kindah tribes.

Undisputedly, the inscriptions listed above are all important tools in the study of early Arabic development, but depending on these few pre Islamic inscriptions alone can be misleading. First, etching letters on hard surfaces can distort significantly intended forms. Second, by referencing few inscriptions alone one would not have enough data to make informed conclusions since only few letters shapes are revealed. Third, all referenced inscriptions belonged to a limited geographic area which would make a comprehensive study impossible.

Evidence of Early Islamic Inscriptions

A balanced study of Arabic script roots must examine letter forms of the early Islamic decades since they show more precise shapes on non stone media. It is not clear as why no pre-Islamic inscriptions on such media are available, especially knowing that we do have Arabic papyri from as early as the second decade of the Islamic Hijrī calendar. Also recall that Ibn al-Nadīm wrote about his handling a pre-Islamic Musnad manuscript.

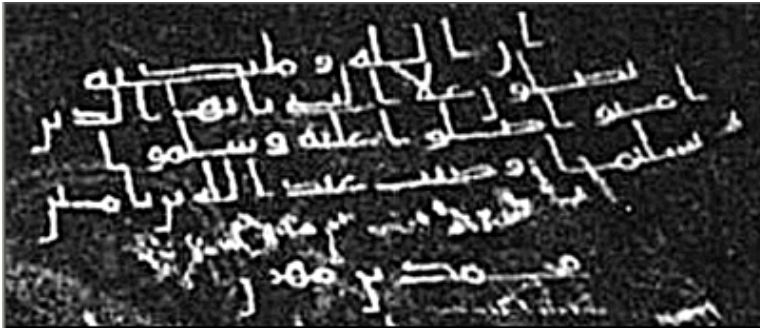
The two earliest Islamic inscriptions were found in Madīnah and are dated to 4 Hijrī calendar (625 CE.) Both had reasonably developed Kufic shapes.¹¹ Also from the first Hijrī decade, we have two of Prophet Muhammad letters, allegedly in the handwriting of his cousin ʿAlī ibn ʿAbī Ṭālib, to al-Mundhir ibn Sāwī, ruler of Bahrain and conqueror of al-Ḥasāʾ, and Heraclius (Hirqal) the Byzantines emperor. They included very valuable letters forms (like Hāʾ and ʿayn) that can shed a light on the characteristics of early Arabic shapes. In total, it is believed that Prophet Muhammad had sent five to eight letters to neighboring leaders.¹⁵

Many Islamic inscriptions dating from the first few decades of Islam are available to researchers. Noted among them are the two earliest Arabic papyri dated to 22 Hijrī calendar (642 CE). One is a bilingual inscription including Greek writing which is kept

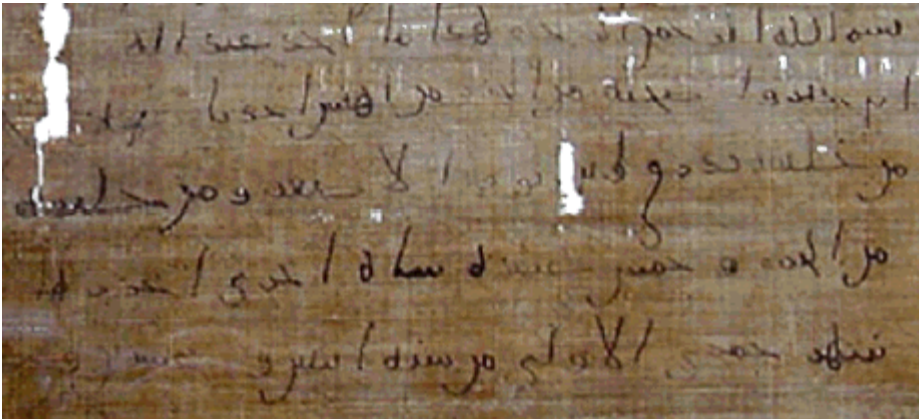


One of the two earliest Arabic Kūfī inscriptions found in Mount Sal', Madīnah, Saudi Arabia. Dated 4 Islamic Hijrī calendar (625 CE) ²⁸

today in the Austrian National Museum, Vienna. Both manuscripts are account settlement about purchase agreements or taxes. Not surprising, the two papyri listed above included clear dots on several letters confirming the fact that dots were used commonly before the fifth decade of the Islamic era when they were officially institutionalized or at least acknowledged.



Early Arabic Kūfī inscription on a rock in Ṭa'if, Saudi Arabia. Dated to early decades of Islam. 20

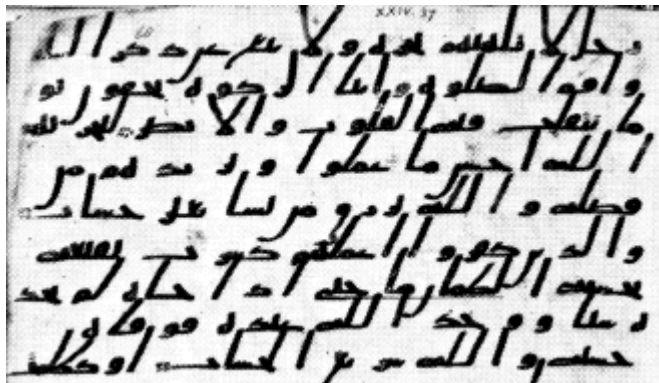


From the earliest Arabic papyrus dated to 22 Hijrī calendar (642 CE) containing Arabic and Greek text. Kept in the Austrian National Museum, Vienna ²⁸

سم الله الرحمن الرحيم
 الله و كبير كبرياوا
 لحمد لله كبرياوسبيرا
 لله بكرة واصلا و لئلا
 طوبى لاله رب
 جبريل و ميكل و اسر
 فيل اعمر لسد م يدك
 الاسلح ما بمكاه م
 كسه و ما باجر و لم قال
 امير رب العلمين

Arabic Kufi inscription found near Karbalā', Iraq, dated 60 Hijrī calendar (683 CE)²⁸ Notice the use of Wāw in Allah akbar on the second line.

Several early papyri of Qur'ān are also available, most written in the Kufic style. One Qur'ān papyrus from Madīnah was identified as an example of a rare, short lived, Mā'il calligraphic style and it was dated to the 8th century, but the author believes it is much older, probably mid 7th century.²⁵ The letter forms of this papyrus are almost identical to that of the two early papyri mentioned above, and that of early Kufic from one the oldest copies of Qur'ān on parchment kept in the Egyptian National Library in Cairo. 14



From a page of an early Qur'ān (Sūrah 24:37) papyrus written in Madīnah, Saudi Arabia, in the Mā'il calligraphy style, which included hidden dots. Dated to the 8th century.²⁵ The author believes this style belongs to early Islamic decades and was written with a formal pre-Islamic Hijāzī Jazm style.



From a page in one of the earliest Qur'an (Surah 10:59) on parchment, written in early undotted Kufic style in Madīnah, Saudi Arabia. Dated to mid 7th century.¹⁴

Another important early kufic Islamic inscription can be found on the outer and inner mosaic of the octagonal Arcades of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, dated back to 64 Hijrī calendar (682 CE). The inscription is well preserved and rather long. Its letterforms are clearly those of the Mā'il style without the slant, probably due to the medium used. This inscription includes some unique diacritics usage. The text of the inscription is Du`ā', which is a form of Islamic prayer that typically includes a mixture of Quranic and non Quranic passages. The subject of the Quranic passages of this text was about the Islamic interpretation of Jesus, which is clearly targeting the sizable Christian community of Jerusalem. The use of Du`ā' in inscriptions, as well as its recital during religious occasions, was (and still is) very common in the Muslim world. To inform the reader, the earlier Kufic inscription near Karbalā', Iraq, also included Du`ā'.



Some of the inscriptions at the Dom of the Rock in Jerusalem dated to 64 Hijrī (684 CE). The top one is from the west and northwest mosaic of the inner octagonal arcade. Notice the third word 'āmanū. The bottom one is from the west and northwest outer octagonal arcade.²⁸

Curiously, the inscription at the Dome of the Rock was a main ingredient of the latest “academic coup d'état” in the field of Arabic and Islamic studies, led by a group of German researchers. Taking advantage of western readers’ unfamiliarity with the concept of Islamic Du`ā`, some put forward an unsubstantiated claim that the Qur`ān did not exist at the time period of this inscription; that is during the Umayyad Caliphate. Despite a wealth of available information and material evidence indicating otherwise, they further claim that the passages of this inscription were “proto-ingredients” that were incorporated into what was to become the Qur`ān *after* the advent of the Abbasid era in 750 CE.

One of these researchers, writing under the pseudonym: Christoph Luxenburg, believes that the Qur`ān was originally a Syriac Christian book that was translated, sometimes incorrectly, to Arabic.²⁸ Fishing out possible coincidental Syriac words combinations within pre-diacritics Arabic script, and exploiting a few known and expected scriptural and interpretational uncertainties in a historical book like the Qur`ān, Luxenburg formulates rather bizarre and contradicting linguistic alternatives. However, it is already acknowledged by Muslims that the allegories and teachings of the Qur`ān are associated with those of Judaism and Christianity, and that the Arabic language had commonly adapted non-Arabic words. Sharing similar roots and timelines, Syriac Aramaic, a sister language that was itself significantly affected by Arabic before and particularly after the Islamic dominance in the 7th century, is therefore a poor etymological reference for Arabic. Luxenburg’s work seems more a religious fundamentalist venture than a scholarly research.

The most striking facts of early Islamic inscriptions are the rich and culturally diverse use of shapes, limited or slightly differing shapes per letter, and loose observation of connectivity. One can easily spot earlier Musnad or Nabataean shapes in various positional forms. It seems that even in the early decades of Islam the Arabs were interchanging letter shapes using a large cache of forms they were previously exposed to. A few obvious examples are the use of final Yāʾ, medial ʾAyn, medial Hāʾ, ligature of medial Bāʾ before Rāʾ, and the medial Qāf of Kufic style. One can argue whether these shapes had come from Nabataean or Musnad, but the fact is Jazm can not be assumed immune to the influence of either script.

The Nabataean Script Influence on Jazm

Examining early Arabic inscriptions leaves little doubt that early Jazm was developed in northern Arabia within reasonable vicinity from the more prominent Aramaic Nabataean environment. Early Jazm inscriptions clearly indicate a trend of permanently borrowing or temporarily mixing Nabataean letter shapes. This practice was common among other scripts in that area. The early inscriptions show shapes for final Dāl, ʾAyn, Wāw, Tāʾ, and Nūn clearly resembling the Nabataean forms, but as indicated earlier these shapes can also be identified with Musnad shapes.

Historically, the area of the Nabataean tribes was known to be a refuge for persecuted people in ancient surrounding cities. Based on geography and Roman history, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of the Nabataeans were ethnically Arab tribes who had adapted the language and script of neighboring Aramaic centers.⁸ Their adaptation of foreign culture had not only set precedents to other Arab tribes in the north but had also created the open environment that was crucial to the development of Jazm.

It is not clear as when the Nabataean script ceased to exist. The dating of the earliest Arabic Jazm inscription and the latest Arabic Nabataean inscription to one year, namely 328 CE, is too ironic. It leaves the misleading impression that the Nabataean script had evolved to Arabic Jazm. None of the other Aramaic scripts in the same geographic area was transformed significantly to a completely different looking script before the Islamic era, why would the Nabataean script be transformed?

The Nabataean kingdom lasted from around 300 BC until its annexation by the Roman Empire in the year 106 CE, but the city of Petra continued its role as an important city in the area until the sixth century.³⁴ The question is why would people abandon their script abruptly few decades before Islam in favor of a significantly different one? One possible hypothesis is that the Nabataean gradual decline had opened the doors for greater influence from surrounding Arab tribes bringing in a newer script.

The argument above can explain why only a fraction of the Nabataean inscriptions were in the Arabic language. It may even explain why late Nabataean inscriptions had significantly more cursive forms than older ones. Among the Arab tribes in the former

Nabataean areas, a newly arriving Jazm may have simply replaced the Nabataean script. Understandably, this argument does not exclude the possibility that Arabic was derived independently from the Nabataean script and co-existed with it before replacing it.

In the early decades of Islam, the Arabs seem to be confused about the origins of the Nabataean people, but several early accounts from Muslim army leaders suggested that they were ethnically a mixture of Arabs and non Arabs.

The Fihrast of Ibn al-Nadīm indicated that they did not speak Arabic. In several pages it referred to Ibn al-Wahshiyah al-Kildānī, originally from a city near Kūfah, translating numerous Nabataean texts to Arabic. Sometimes he was named al-Kisdānī which seems to be a scribing error of the Kāf-Lām ligature. Quoting one of their magicians, Ibn al-Nadīm describes the Nabataeans as “black, barefoot, with cloven heels.” Incidentally, according to al-Fihrast, it seems that the Arabs believed that the Nabataean language was the old language of Babylon and that the Chaldeans (al-Kildāniyyūm) and Assyrians (al-Siryāniyyūn) spoke a varied accent of it.²²

When isolated, many Nabataean letters are almost identical to those of Aramaic or Aramaic Hebrew. Forcing connectivity seemed as an after thought. The Nabataeans were probably exposed to scripts practicing connectivity in their vicinity. Such cursive script could have been a cursive Musnad variant. Possibly, they wanted to set their new script apart from surrounding Aramaic scripts by incorporating an existing defining feature or inventing one. It is interesting to note here that the cursive rules of late Nabataean are generally similar to those of early Arabic.

Numerous inscriptions from the Arabian Peninsula confirm that the northern Arab tribes had continued using Musnad.³³³³ Some Arabs of the Nabataean lands may have embraced an Aramaic like script to facilitate better communication and trade relations with the surrounding cities, but it seems that they had used two scripts all along. As a matter of fact, one cannot rule out that several Nabataean letters could have been derived directly from Musnad.

In the early centuries, predominantly Arab Palmyra, not far from the Nabataean area, used two writing systems, a monumental isolated script and a cursive Mesopotamian script. This was probably due to its location on the trade route between Persia and the Roman Empire. The Palmyra gods had Musnad inscriptions. Even though their letter shapes were mostly derived from Aramaic, the letters Thā´ and Rā´ seem to be directly borrowed from Musnad.²⁴

It is very important to observe here that evidence of Nabataean shapes usage in early Jazm inscriptions is limited geographically to areas of Nabataean influence. It is also limited to few pre-Islamic inscriptions. One can not conclude with absolute certainty if these shapes represented original Jazm shapes or just temporary localized ones.

Musnad Roots of Arabic Jazm

Despite hints of Nabataean influence, judging by available Islamic and pre-Islamic inscriptions, it is undeniable that Jazm was primarily derived from a Musnad background. Identical letter shapes like Rā', Wāw, `Ayn, and Hā' were used in Jazm even after Islam. By examining Musnad shapes in all its variants including cursive styles, one can easily spot common visual characteristics with Jazm and later calligraphic styles like Kūfī. The letters Sheen, Yā', Mīm, Lām, `Ayn, Hā', Jīm, Fā', Qāf, Dhāl, Zā', Kāf, and Nūn, can all be traced to Musnad.

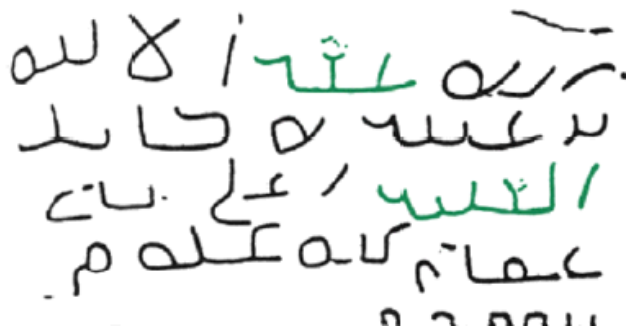
The extent to which Musnad shapes changed to over the centuries supports the above shapes transformations hypothesis. Evidence shows that a typical scriptural transformation process can involve flipping and rotating shapes along with minor or major eliminations of components. In Musnad, this would mean rotating monumental letters to assume horizontal positions and eliminating parts that interfere with a smooth cursive writing process or letters shapes recognition and differentiation.



The earliest pre-Islamic Arabic Jazm inscription found near Jabal al-Ramm, east of Aqabah. Dated 328 CE. From a photograph by Lankester Harding ⁷

The earliest Arabic inscription, Ramm, did not include clear letter forms to study, but it was important since it included a mixture of Musnad and Jazm letters. Grimme believed the Arabic text was inscribed earlier. Bellamy thought otherwise. The two differed completely in their readings of the Arabic text but agreed on ignoring the Musnad text.⁷ Madun believes this inscription is the missing link between Jazm and Musnad. He read both texts as one.¹⁸ The author believes that letters of both scripts were inscribed together and the value of this inscription is primarily in the presence of Musnad shapes side by side primitive Jazm. As we saw earlier, the Raqqūsh Nabatean inscription included Musnad too. No one questioned its presence there. Why should we then question it in Ramm, especially when the quality of shapes of both texts is identical, and the usage of random text direction within one inscription is quite common in old Arabia?

The pre-Islamic Jazm Umm al-Jimāl inscription is probably the most significant and controversial one. Scholars differed on its date, but most believe it belongs to the 5th or 6th century. Some refer to it as the second Umm al-Jimāl inscription to differentiate it from the earlier Nabataean Umm al-Jimāl inscription mentioned above. It seems that this inscription had used multiple shapes for Hāʾ in its final, medial, and isolated forms, twice each. This usage confirms both al-Hamadhānī and Ibn al-Nadīm sketches regarding multiple Musnad Hāʾ shapes. Also, the medial shapes of Hāʾ in this inscription clearly match those seen in the two available letters of Prophet Muhammad, which were written a century later. The two letters included a total of eight words with initial and medial Musnad Hāʾ shapes.

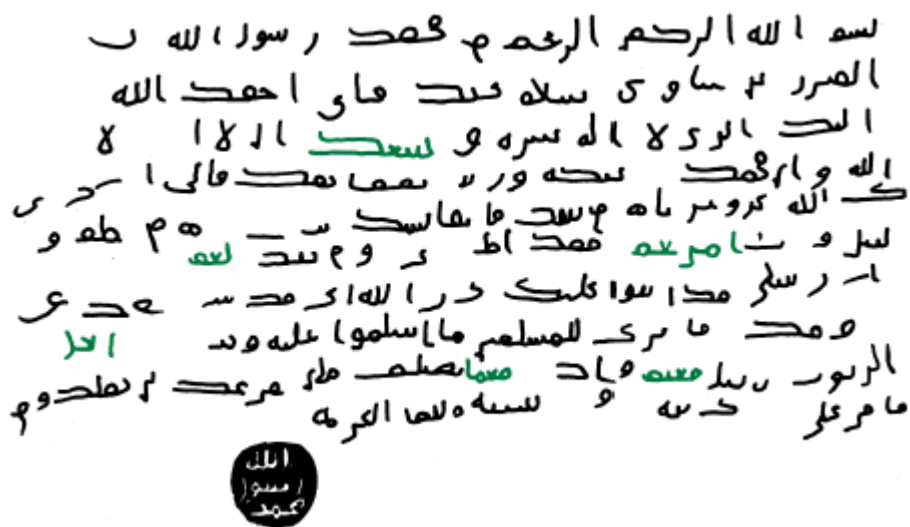


Pre-Islamic Arabic Jazm inscription of Umm al-Jimāl found south of Damascus, Syria. Dated to 4th or 5th century 18 Highlighted in green are the words `ahada and al-hunayd, with medial Musnad letter Hāʾ.

Many today read the second word of the first line as ghafara and the first word of the third line as al-khulayd or al-qulayd. The author reads the first word as `ahada or `ahuda and the second al-hunayd. Reading a Nabataean Rāʾ in ghafara would contradict with the current reading of all previous and subsequent inscriptions. Jazm had consistently used Musnad Rāʾ even in the early decades of Islam. In Arabic the word ghafara means “forgave.” Mādūn argued ghafara here meant “to protect” or “to keep safe” but this use is rare. The words `ahada and satara are more commonly used instead.



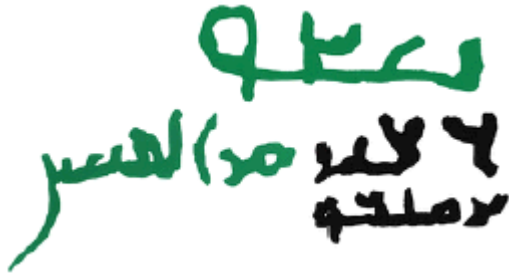
A photograph of Prophet Muhammad letter to al-Mundhir ibn Sāwī, ruler of Bahrain, kept in the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad, Iraq, or Tob Qabi Museum in Istanbul., Turkey. It was delivered by `Alā' ibn Ḥadhramī.¹⁵ Words with Musnad letter Hā' are circled.



Re-Trace by the author of Prophet Muhammad letter to al-Mundhir ibn Sāwī from a previous trace that was compared to the original photograph.¹⁷ Words with initial and medial Musnad letter Hā' are highlighted in green. They are from right to left and top to bottom: 'ishhad, 'amruhum, lahum, 'ahl, minhum, and mahma.

One of the earlier inscriptions of Sakākah may have also used medial position Musnad Hā'. Muaikele spelled the first word as Ba', `Ayn, Sīn, and Wāw, assumingly referring to a name, Ba'sū.²¹ However, this is not a known, Arabic sounding, name. Besides, the third letter does not even remotely resemble any Arabic or Nabataean shape for the letter Seen. Reading a hint of a middle tooth, in an inscription full with similar slightly raised areas, is bizarre. Clearly, this letter looks more like a Musnad Ha as discussed above. The word is probably bā`ahū or bi`hū which in Arabic would mean "sold him" and "sell him"

respectively. At least, reading this word in this manner would match the current reading of the inscription which is supposedly about a slave of 'Umru' al-Qays.



One of two pre-Islamic Arabic Jazm inscriptions found in Sakākah, Saudi Arabia. Dated 4th or early 5th century.²⁸ Highlighted in green are the word bi`hū (or bā`ahū) with medial Musnad letter Hā` (top) and 'Umru' al-Qays (bottom).

Evidence that early Arabic was independently derived from a cursive Musnad background can be seen in its usage of a unique Alīf shape resembling one of the variant shapes used by northern Ṣafawī Musnad style. That Alīf is slanted to the right with an angle identical to slanted cursive Musnad. This unique slanted Alīf can be seen in all inscriptions. Even Hamadhānī observed it in his sketch of Musnad shapes. The small Nabataean shape of looped Alīf which was commonly placed much higher above the base line is very unlikely to transform to Jazm Alīf.

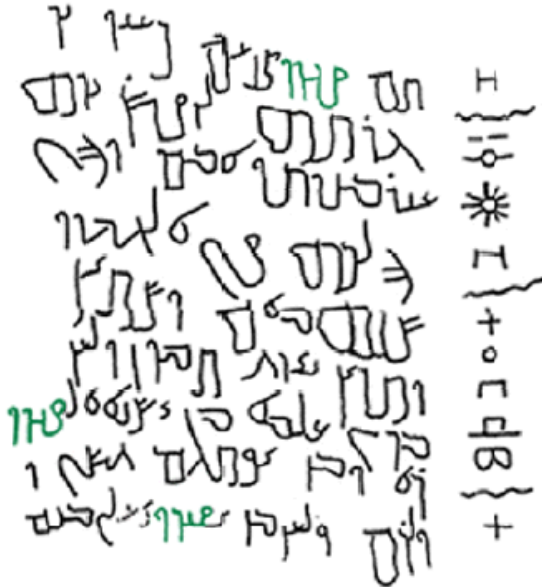
Further supporting our argument are the papyri inscriptions of that not-so-rare Quranic Mā'il calligraphic style and the two account papyri mentioned above. The author believes that this Mail style was not unusual, short lived, calligraphic style born after Islam as it is commonly thought today. It seems that Mā'il was the Ḥijīzī style of early Arabic Jazm which was gradually phased out by the Kufic and Naskh styles after Islam. In fact, letters forms of early Kufic style are almost identical to those of Mā'il. Examining Mā'il papyri one can easily observe not only the slanted Alīfs but also the miniature Ṣafawī Musnad Wāw.

The most compelling evidence of Jazm cursive Musnad connection is the way it joins letter shapes along a straight horizontal line. The same extended, open-ended, horizontal strokes seen to the left of almost every cursive Musnad letter is used in cursive Jazm. This unique approach sets it apart from Nabataean or other scripts in the area. It is possible to imagine that sometimes during the 3rd century the Nabataeans had altered their letter shapes significantly to conform to complete horizontality, but the same can be argued for Musnad.

Questioning the Nabataean Inscriptional Evidence

As was mentioned earlier, the theory of a Nabataean transformation is completely based on three Arabic inscriptions in Nabataean script. One of these inscriptions is Raqqūsh. It is said to represent the earliest Arabic forms.³⁵ & 13 However, the existence of few Arabic looking connected words in that inscription seems to be coincidental. The word

qabrū (Arabic for grave) was repeated three times in the inscription but only once it resembled Arabic. Raqqūsh is a classic late Nabatean inscription, or at best it could be Nabataean inscribed by someone with Jazm background. This would agree with experts who labeled it as a “border dialect.”



Earliest Nabataean inscription of Arabic text found in Madāʿin Salih, northern Hijāz, Saudi Arabia. Dated 267 CE²⁸ Notice Vertical Musnad on the right. Highlighted in Green is the word qabrū in three locations.

Incidentally, it is not very peculiar to see dots in the Raqqūsh inscription. As stated earlier, dots are possibly a pre Islamic invention. Persian scripts like Pahlavi and Avesta may have used dots earlier. The script of Palmyra included dots which may have been picked from Persian controlled Mesopotamia.³¹ It is very likely dots were passed to late Nabataean via Palmyra. The fact that the Arabs had called the addition of dots to Arabic during the seventh century ʿi`jām or ta`jīm proves this contention. Both of these words translates to “de-Arabize” or “to make it un-Arabic.”

Found Earlier, but dated few decades later, the Namārah Nabataean inscription is also widely indicated as an early Jazm connection. The first abstract sketch produced from the original stone, which is kept in the Lovure Museum in Paris, shows few words with horizontally connected shapes resembling Arabic. The second word of the second line was interpreted as a Lām-Alif ligature following an Alif even though it appears partially deteriorated. In several other areas one can spot forms resembling Arabic final Baa and Hāʿ, multiple shapes per Nabataean Kāf, and even a hint of future Arabic Tāʿ Marbūtah!

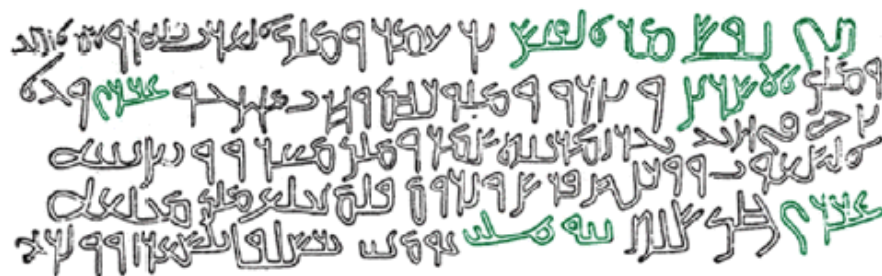
Visually retracing and rereading the inscription in the 1980s of last century, Bellamy mainly reinforced earlier Dussaud observations, but in absence of physical examination, it is quite difficult to judge the Namārah shapes from photographs. For example, Bellamy provided three photographs that show significantly different letter lines in the deteriorated area on the second text line where a Lām-Alif ligature was supposedly used in the word al-ʿAsadiyyīn. The problem is clarifying one area in a picture significantly

changed the appearance of lines in other areas. As Bellamy himself puts it, “photographs can be deceptive.”⁶

Assuming the current shapes of Namārah are accurate, problems still exist regarding their interpretations. Current readings are not totally objective. They assume in advance that this inscription represented a “developed form of Nabataean alphabet, well on its way to becoming Arabic.”⁶ But one can argue important contradictions in these readings.

The first line was translated as “this is the funerary monument of ‘Umru’ al-Qays,” giving the impression that the Namārah stone was once placed on his grave, but the Arabic reading, on the other hand, was “tī nafs mru’ l-Qays”. The two do not match since tī is not an Arabic word for “this” and nafs in Arabic means “soul” not “grave.” Also, since the earlier Raqqūsh inscription had explicitly and extensively used the Arabic word qabrū for grave, why wouldn’t an inscription, only a few decades later, use this same word?

Despite the fact that most words in the current reading of the inscription are clearly Arabic words, `akdī is not. Experts differed significantly about its meaning, but they believed that it could be an old Arabic adverb word meaning “thereafter” or “forever”, which is not convincing. The word `akdī appeared in two sentences. First in “harraba mahjū `akdī wa ja’ ..” then in “`akdī halak sanat ..” Because it was placed, in both cases, before a verb, the author believes that it referred to a name and that Namarah was either a burial stone or an honorary monument for a colleague of ‘Umru’ al-Qays named `akdī. Hence, and after an opening sentence in honor of ‘Umru’ al-Qays, Namarah listed `akdī’s accomplishments before stating the date of his death.



Nabataean inscription of Namārah found south of Damascus, Syria. Dated 328 C.E.²⁸ Highlighted in green are from top to bottom, right to left: tī nafs mru’ l-Qays, al-‘Asadiyyīn, `akdī (twice), and the year.

As for the inscriptions of Ḥarrān and 'Usays, the dating of Namārah Nabatean inscription was also based on the reading of two parts number following the Arabic word for year. Looking from right to left, the last portion of the second part was identical visually in all three inscriptions. It was read by experts as the number 23. This reading would make dates of all three inscriptions having same least significant number, 3, which is too ironic. Additionally, after researching Nabataean numerals, no definitive equivalence to that shape was found.¹⁰ As mentioned earlier, it can not be ruled out that this symbol may have represented an event or a year mark, not a number.

Dating the Namārah inscriptions is very important since the second oldest Arabic Jazm inscription found in Sakākah, Saudi Arabia, explicitly mentioned an associate, admirer, or may be a son of a slave of 'Umru' al-Qays. Its date was estimated to be around that of Namārah or a century later at most. Examining how 'Umru' al-Qays was written in both inscriptions few decades apart leaves one with the impression that Nabataean could not have transformed to Jazm but co existed and interacted with it.

Conclusion

Arabic Jazm in its early centuries was most likely a localized version of cursive Musnad used by northern Arabian tribes. Clearly, Musnad was not set in stone while its relatives, Phoenician and Aramaic scripts, evolved into a variety of other styles. Because of their nomadic nature the northern Arab tribes were exposed to a wide range of neighboring letter forms which had affected Jazm development. Evidently, the lack of utilization by a powerful central state had prolonged the Jazm development cycle.

For a long time, early Arabic was torn between its Musnad roots and the more mature Aramaic scripts around it. It may have had incorporated several Nabataean shapes, but it is hard to definitely claim it was a transformed Nabataean script based on a couple of inscriptions distantly resembling Arabic, especially since Aramaic Nabataean and Musnad have similar shape roots, and especially, since determining shapes of an inscription is not a definite and precise scientific process.

It is not clear which northern Arab tribes had first used Jazm. This is not important, however, since despite their vast geographic area, these tribes were very close culturally. Most definitely, the emergence of pre Islamic Mecca as a prominent center for trade and worship in the Arabian Peninsula had played a major role in the forming and spread of Jazm to the extent that it became known as the script of Hijaz.

The Arab tribes of Ḥīrah could have been the originators of Jazm, or may be due to their exposure to Persian Sassanid scripts, could have been the ones who had significantly transformed it by incorporating smoother curves and rhythm. However, the direct predecessor of modern Arabic was the Jazm style of Ḥijāz. In fact, Arabic had only developed into clear solid script after the emergence of Islam when a derived style, Kūfī, became the official and religious script of the new Islamic state.

Arabic Jazm was a script with powerful shapes and dynamics. Being a true regional product shaped by the forms of both Musnad and Aramaic, it had quickly established itself as the unifying script of the greater Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, and Persia. In as little as two centuries after the Islamic era, Arabic became a prominent world script with rich calligraphic traditions. The older scripts of the area which survived until today were significantly affected by its success. And with the expansion of Islam, even distant nation's scripts took Arabic shapes. This is expected since for many centuries, and in a vast area of the earth, Arabic became the undisputed script for science and culture.

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Acknowledgement

All diagrams in this article were prepared by Hassan Jamil a recent graduate of Baruch College.

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