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Shaddel, Mehdy

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Traces of the *hamza* in the Early Arabic Script: The Inscriptions of Zuhayr, Qays the Scribe, and ‘Yazīd the King’

Mehdy Shaddel

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Traces of the *hamza* in the Early Arabic Script: The Inscriptions of Zuhayr, Qays the Scribe, and ‘Yazīd the King’*

Mehdy Shaddel

Abstract

The present article re-edits three early Islamic inscriptions that exhibit an orthographic feature believed to represent the glottal stop (*hamz*). Overall, this orthographic device (referred to as ‘proto-*hamza*’) is employed four times in the three inscriptions, bringing the number of its known attestations to a grand total of nine. The article concludes by making some broad observations on the multifarious nature of the early Arabic writing tradition(s).

Keywords: Arabic (Script) Inscriptions Islamic Arabic Inscription Palaeography Hamza Arabic Orthography

1 Introduction

It is well known that the early Arabic script lacked not only diacritics distinguishing between polyphonic glyphs, but also a sign to represent the glottal

*The bulk of the material in this paper grew out of stimulating discussions with Marijn van Putten (Universiteit Leiden) and Ahmad Al-Jallad (Universiteit Leiden). Marijn van Putten, Ahmad Al-Jallad, Michael Macdonald (University of Oxford), and Laïla Nehmé (Centre national de la recherche scientifique) kindly read through several drafts of this paper and offered very constructive comments and suggestions, for which I am much indebted to them. My thanks are also due to Ahmad Al-Jallad for encouraging me to write this article, and for inviting me to submit it to *AEN*. I am, of course, solely responsible for all remaining errors and misinterpretations.

stop (*hamz*), as is evidenced by the extant Quranic manuscripts and early Islamic Arabic inscriptions. This probably reflects the fact that *hamz* had been lost in the dialect in which the Quran was originally articulated – the variety of Arabic to which the standardised ‘Classical Arabic’ of later centuries is so heavily indebted. Whatever the case may be, the fact remains that, in its present form, the sign representing the glottal stop, the *hamza*, was a relative late-comer into the Arabic writing system.¹

Be that as it may, Frédéric Imbert (2012: 123–126) has recently drawn attention to an orthographic peculiarity in a number of inscriptions which he has termed the ‘proto-*hamza*’. Three of the four examples he produces mark the *hamza* in word-internal positions in the words *mu’minin* and *qara’a-hu*, using two dots (that is, as *المؤمنس* and *المؤمنس* and *قراه*). His final specimen is a *rajaz* poem inscribed on a rock in Qā‘ banī Murr and contains a word that appears as *عرا*. Imbert reads the word as ‘*azā’a*’ and takes its final dot to be another way of representing *hamz*.²

In the conclusion to his article, Imbert seems to suggest that a sign to represent *hamz* was developed (probably late) in the first century of Islam, but a recent find has thrown a different light on this issue. Discovered near Qaṣr Burqu‘ in northeastern Jordan, a graffito invoking God to protect an enigmatic ‘Yazīd-w the king’ exhibits what appears to be a dot representing the glottal stop atop the *alif* of the word *al-’ilāh*. This graffito, which also features a cross, bears all the hallmarks of pre-Islamic Christian Arabic inscriptions: it refers to the monotheistic God as *al-ilāh*, uses the invocation formula *ḍakara l-ilāh*, produces the proper noun Yazīd with wawation (*yzydw*), and exhibits some other orthographic idiosyncrasies that are reminiscent of pre-Islamic Christian Arabic orthographic conventions. Nevertheless, the Yazīd of this inscription is likely identified with the Umayyad caliph Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwīya (r. 60–64 AH), thereby making it an Islamic-era document (al-Shdaifat et al. 2017).

In the light of the peculiarities of the inscription, Ahmad Al-Jallad concludes the study with the tentative proposal that, whatever the date of its composition, it is the sole representative of a pre-Islamic orthographic tradition that may have lingered on well into the Islamic period, and eventually lost out to rival

¹For an overview of the *status quaestionis*, along with many new insights, see Van Putten (forthcoming).

² Al-Ghabbān 2017: 480, however, reads it as *ḡazā*, ignoring the dot.



Figure 1: ‘Abd al-Malik’s monumental inscription from ‘Aqabat Fig, Golan heights, Syria, dated 73 AH. Note the two dots atop the wāw of mu’minin at the end of line 6. This is one of the specimens brought to light by Imbert (2015). For a discussion of its date and location, see Sharon (1966).



Figure 2: The inscription mentioning ‘Yazīd the king’. Note the dot atop the alif of ʿilāh.

traditions and died out towards the turn of the second Islamic century (al-Shdaifat et al. 2017: 322–323). The present study reproduces and re-edits three inscriptions from the early Islamic period that feature a total of four attestations of this orthographic peculiarity, the ‘proto-hamza’ – with all four marking the *hamzat al-qaṭʿ* – and concludes by proffering some further musings on the thought-provoking hypothesis put forth by Al-Jallad.

2 The inscriptions of Zuhayr

Both of the two inscriptions of Zuhayr were discovered by ʿAlī al-Ġabbān and Ḥayāt al-Kilābī in 1999 in the region of Qāʿ al-Muʿtadil, between al-ʿUlā and

Madā'in Ṣaliḥ in northwestern Saudi Arabia (Ghabban 2008). They have been engraved close to each other, and would accordingly seem to be the work of one and the same Zuhayr, the client of Ibnat Shayba, and in the same time, the year 24 AH. They are amongst the earliest extant dated Islamic documents and refer to the death of the second caliph 'Umar ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb (r. 13–23 AH).³

2.1 The undated inscription of Zuhayr



Transcription, translation, and tracing:

أنا زهير مولى إبت شيبية

'I am Zuhayr, the client of Ibnat Shayba.'

³I will presently return to the issue of the date of 'Umar's assassination and its relation to the date of the inscription. On the accounts of the assassination of 'Umar, consult El-Hibri (2010: 108–116).

Commentary:

The *alif* of *ʿanā* exhibits a large, lozenge-shaped dot above it. ‘Ali al-Ghabban was able to identify two other dots in the graffito, one on the *nūn* of *ʿanā* and the other atop the *zāy* of *zuhayr* (Ghabban 2008: 213); I am not certain if these are really dots or simply scrapes on the surface of the rock, but since it is not possible to distinguish the colour of the patina in the black-and-white photograph above, I have retained them in my tracing.⁴

The dot of *ʿanā* clearly represents the *hamzat al-qaṭʿ*, but, interestingly enough, no dot features atop the *alif* of *ibnat*. This shows that, just like the dots used to distinguish between polyphonic glyphs, the proto-*hamza* was not consistently represented in writing either.

The length of the dotted *alifs* in both this and the following inscription is considerably shorter than the final *alif* of *anā*, but it seems that the engraver intended for the dotted *alifs* together with their dots to have more or less the same overall length as an undotted *alif*. This also proves that the dot is not an accidental scratch on the surface of the rock, nor is it the result of a disjuncture in the upper part of the *alif*, for in which case the colour of the patina in the space between the dot and the *alif* must have been different.

Nonetheless, one *prima facie* problem with the dots of this inscription is that – if those over the *nūn* of *ʿanā* and the *zāy* of *zuhayr* are original to it – they are of considerably different sizes (this holds true for the dated inscription of Zuhayr as well).⁵ This could be explained in two possible ways: that the two dots distinguishing between polyphonic glyphs were added by a later hand;⁶ or that the dot of the *hamza* is made larger to indicate that it represents something else.⁷ In any case, whoever etched the dot of the *alif* there was familiar with an orthographic tradition in which the *hamzat al-qaṭʿ* could be represented with a dot atop the *alif*.

⁴Cf. the commentary on the dated inscription of Zuhayr further *infra*.

⁵The dot of the *nūn* of *sana* in the dated inscription is almost as large as that of the *hamza*, however.

⁶An, admittedly unlikely, possibility first suggested to me by Robert Hoyland.

⁷My thanks to Laïla Nehmé for convincing me that this could be a possible explanation. Al-Dānī’s assertion (al-Dānī 1997 [1418]: 19–20; cited by George (2015: 7) that the people of Medina indicated the *hamza* in Quran manuscripts using yellow ink and all the other vowels using red ink lends some support to this explanation.

2.2 The dated inscription of Zuhayr



Transcription, translation, and tracing:

1. بسم الله
2. أنا زهير كتبت زمن توفي عمر سنة أربع
3. وعشرين

'In the name of God. I am Zuhayr. I wrote [this] when 'Umar died, the year 24.'

A tracing of the Arabic inscription from the rock. The text is written in black ink on a white background. The tracing is arranged in several lines, with the first line starting with 'بسم الله'. The text is a clear and legible representation of the original inscription.

Commentary:

The *alif* of *allāh* in the first line features a small tail that is characteristic of first century AH inscriptions, but this tail does not appear in the *alifs* of *anā* and *arbaʿ* in the second line (nor in the *alifs* of the undated inscription). There is at least one other case of a combination of the two forms of the *alif* being used in the same inscription, and in that case, too, the term *allāh* is written with a tailed *alif*.⁸ It seems that the orthography of theonyms had a ring of conservatism to it, and they were usually written according to more archaic orthographic conventions.⁹

As in the previous inscription, the first *alif* of *ʿanā* features a large, somewhat elongated dot above it, which must represent the glottal stop. Likewise, the colour of the patina in the space separating the dot and the *alif*, as well as the shorter length of the *alif*, demonstrate that this is an actual dot representing the *hamzat al-qaṭʿ*, and not a dent or scratch on the rock.

Al-Ghabban was able to identify nine dotted letters (i.e., dots to distinguish between polyphonic glyphs) in the graffito,¹⁰ but at least some of these dots must actually be just dents on the moonlike surface of the rock: for instance, on closer inspection, the colour of the patina of the ‘dot’ atop the *nūn* of *ʿanā* and the *fāʾ* of *tuwuffiya* unmistakably shows them to be scratches on the surface, and the other two dots over the *tāʾ* of *tuwuffiya* are hopelessly misplaced to belong to the original engraving.¹¹ The only dents that look authentic enough as dots are the one over the *nūn* of *sana* and those of the *šin* of *ʿiṣrīn*, which I have retained in my tracing, though this is not to say that they definitely are dots.

⁸Al-Rāšid (2009 [1430]: 205). I am indebted to Marijn van Putten for bringing this inscription to my notice.

⁹Cf. Al-Jallad’s discussion of the tailed and untailed *alif* in al-Shdaifat et al. (2017: 322). According to his proposal, the tailed *alif*, which is typical of seventh-century Islamic inscriptions, is an archaic leftover and older than the untailed *alif*, which is the predominant form that we find in sixth-century Christian Arabic inscriptions. Al-Jallad has recently discovered another archaism in the orthography of the theonym *al-īlāh*, which he will discuss in a future publication.

¹⁰He also identifies a scratch over the *zāy* of *zuhayr* as a dot in his tracing (Ghabban 2008: 211), but does not count it in the body of the article (ibid., 225).

¹¹There are in fact two sets of such features observable over the *tāʾ* of *tuwuffiya*, a couple behind and above the denticle of the *tāʾ*, and another two over its baseline. Ghabban appears to have, rather arbitrarily, taken the first two as dots and the latter two as features of the rock.

If written according to the rules of modern Arabic orthography, the inscription would have dots in sixteen letters. Nine dotted letters out of sixteen would not really be common for such an early inscription as this: the inscriptions of Salama, from the year 23 AH, Yazīd ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Salūlī, from 27 AH, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥayr al-Ḥijrī, from the year 31, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥālid ibn al-‘Āṣ, from 40, and Judaym ibn ‘Alī ibn Hubayra, from 52, feature no dots. The inscription of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Dayrām, from the year 46, features only one dot; the foundation inscription of a dam built by Mu‘āwiya in Ṭā’if from 58 AH exhibits sixteen dotted letters, out of a total of 46 that would have dots when written according to modern orthography; and the number for the relatively lengthy papyrus PERF 558 (the Aḥnas papyrus), from the year 22 AH, is twelve.¹² The odds, then, are that most of those are simply scratches on the surface of the rock.¹³

The dating of the inscription using two formulae – the death of the caliph ‘Umar and the newly-devised *hijrī* calendar – is not an uncommon practice in pre- and early Islamic graffiti. Al-Ghabban himself mentions the pre-Islamic inscription of Ḥarrān as another example, which is dated using both the era of Provincia Arabia and the event of the destruction (? *mafsad*)¹⁴ of Ḥaybar.¹⁵ Another attestation can be found in a remarkable newly discovered inscription that is dated to ‘the year *al-masjid al-ḥarām* was rebuilt, the year 78’ (*‘ām buniya l-masjid al-ḥarām li-sanat tamān wa-sab‘in*; al-Ḥārītī 2007 [1428]). Two further inscriptions from the early second century AH are double-dated to when ‘the Banū Ḥātim died... the year 117’ (*wa-fīhi tuwuffū banī [sic] ḥātim... wa-huwa fī sanat sab‘a ‘aṣar [sic] wa-mi’a*; Sharon 2004: 179–180); and ‘the year 119, during the caliphate of Hiṣām’ (*sanat tis‘ aṣara wa-mi’a ‘alā ḥilāfat hiṣām*; Sharon 2004: 179).¹⁶

¹²For these documents, consult Ghabban (2008) and al-Ghabbān (2017: 806–813).

¹³It is always problematic to use part of the evidence to decide how the rest of it should look, but this could act as a rule of thumb: if there is some doubt about whether there are dots in an early inscription, then a comparison with other early inscriptions could be of help in deciding the matter.

¹⁴Macdonald is inclined to read this word as *mufsad*, but, even in the sense of ‘destruction’, *mafsad* probably makes better sense.

¹⁵Ghabban (2008: 214). For the inscription, see Macdonald (2015: 414–415). The reading of the final words – which apparently date the inscription by an event – are debated, however.

¹⁶I am grateful to Ilkka Lindstedt for drawing my attention to these two inscriptions.

But in this inscription, it would seem, the use of double-dating is not exclusively animated by a desire for clarity, but also for considerations of accuracy. According to traditional sources, the caliph ‘Umar was assassinated towards the end of the year 23, and died shortly thereafter.¹⁷ It is clear that the event had a profound impact on the engraver, who thought it enough of a watershed moment to use it for dating the inscription. But he seems to have done the engraving sometime after the event, in (very probably early) 24 AH, thereby requiring a further dating formula to give the exact year. In this regard note must be taken of the fact that the inscription reads ‘when ‘Umar died’ (*zaman tuwuffiya ‘umar*), which could theoretically be (slightly earlier) in the previous year, rather than ‘in the year ‘Umar died’.

3 The inscription of Qays the scribe

This graffito was discovered in Taymā’, northwestern Saudi Arabia, by Muḥammad al-Nājim of the Taymā’ museum and was subsequently documented as part of the Saudi–British–German project ‘Epigraphy and the Ancient Landscape in the Hinterland of Taymā’’, led by Muḥammad al-Nājim, Michael Macdonald, and Arnulf Hausleiter. It was first published by Frédéric Imbert in 2015.¹⁸ The inscription’s orthographic features point to a date of composition in the first century AH, and, judging by the way the engraver laments the death of the third caliph ‘Utmān ibn ‘Affān (r. 24–35 AH), it appears to have been written shortly after the caliph’s assassination in late 35 AH, when the memory of the event was still fresh in his mind.¹⁹

¹⁷The rather wide array of authorities quoted by Ibn ‘Asākir (1996 [1417]: xlv: 463–467) are virtually agreed that he died four days before the end of the year 23 (with one putting it at eight days). Al-Ṭabarī (1967 [1387]: iv: 193–194) gives three or four days before the end of the year (or the first day of 24, but this seems to be the date of his burial). Cf. also al-Mas‘ūdī (2005 [1425]: ii: 240); al-Balāḍurī (1996 [1417]: x: 439); Ibn Sa‘d (2001 [1421]: iii: 338); and al-Ya‘qūbī (2010 [1431]: ii: 52), who all put it at four days before the end of the year. Ḥalīfa ibn Ḥayyāt (1985 [1405]: 152) is alone in giving the first or fifth day of the year 24 AH, alongside another report putting it at three days before the end of the previous year, 23 AH.

¹⁸Imbert (2015: 65–66). Unfortunately, this edition lacks a tracing and contains some errors. Imbert also failed to take notice of the dots atop the *alifs*.

¹⁹On this episode, see Hinds (1972).

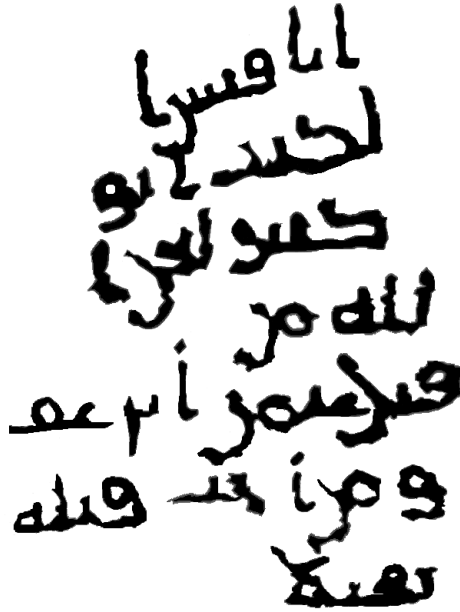


Photo courtesy of Michael Macdonald.

Transcription, translation, and tracing:

1. أنا قيس ا
2. لكتب أبو
3. كثير لعن ا
4. لله من
5. قتل عثمان ابن عفان]
6. ومن أحت²⁰ قتله
7. تفتلا²¹ [sic]

‘I am Qays the scribe, Abū Kutayyir. May God curse whoever killed ‘Utmān ibn ‘Affān and whoever precipitated his death.’



Commentary:

Significantly, the inscription features no dots in polyphonic glyphs such as *yā*²⁰, *tā*²⁰, *tā*²⁰, *nūn*, and *qāf*. There are, however, two dots atop the *alifs* of the words *‘ibn* in line 5 and *‘aḥatta* in line 6. These dots are obviously not the result of a disjuncture in the upper part of the *alifs*, for, while the *alifs* are stretched vertically, the dots have clearly been etched by moving the tool diagonally at an approximately 45° angle relative to the *alifs*.

Both of these dots evidently represent the *hamza*, but again, as in the Zuhayr inscription, *hamz* is not consistently indicated: the words *‘anā* and *‘abū* do

²⁰It is also possible to read this word as *aḥabba*, but since the formulation *aḥabba qatlahu taqtīlan* strikes me as somewhat curious I have decided, following Imbert, to opt for *aḥatta*.

²¹I am grateful to a pseudonymous observer on Twitter who pointed out to me that this word lacks a denticle.

not feature a dot atop their *hamzat al-qat'*, which is reminiscent of the total inconsistency in the use of diacritical dots in the early Arabic script.²² This might indicate that the proto-*hamza* was a relatively young innovation whose usage was not yet standardised (and, as it turned out, would never be).

The dot over the *alif* of the word *ibn*, whose *hamz* is not realised when not in a phrase-initial position in Classical Arabic, indicates that the word would have been realised /ʔabn/ or /ʔibn/ in the dialect of the engraver. We cannot be certain if the word was realised /ʔabn/ in his dialect, for, as the evidence of the 'Yazid the king' inscription demonstrates, the proto-*hamza* atop an *alif* could also represent a glottal stop followed by other short vowels such as /i/. In any event, the appearance of the proto-*hamza* atop the *alif* of *ibn* in this inscription does show that the *hamza* of *ibn* was never lost in the dialect spoken by the engraver of the inscription. The fact that both in early Islamic inscriptions and documents and in the canonised Classical Arabic of later centuries there is an ambiguity as to the orthography of *ibn* in non-initial positions (it is spelt both بن and ٲن) might lend further credence to the hypothesis that in many ancient dialects of Arabic the *alif* of *ibn* was always pronounced.²³

The final word (in line 7) of the inscription seems to be missing a denticle, but is, in all likelihood, to be read تقيلا.

4 Concluding remarks

It is noteworthy that all the examples of the proto-*hamza* discovered thus far – eight in total – come from regions that were once part of the ancient kingdom of Nabataea (later the Roman empire's Provincia Arabia).²⁴ It has, on

²²It is usually contended that, in the earliest period, dots were mainly used to avoid ambiguity, but even a cursory look at the documentary record shows that there is no truth to this claim; the appearance of the dots follows no apparent logic and is evidently completely *ad hoc*.

²³In several modern dialects of Arabic the *alif* of *ibn* is always realised, as it is in north Yemeni (Behnstedt 1992: 5, s.v. *ʔbn*), the Arabic of mediaeval Andalus (Institute of Islamic Studies of the University of Zaragoza 2013: 49 n. 102, 64), Damascene (Aldoukhi et al. 2014: 61), and Egyptian Arabic (Hinds & Badawi 1986: 5, s.v. *ʔ-b-n*). My thanks to Marijn van Putten for alerting me to the situation in these dialects.

²⁴Imbert's four specimens are from, respectively, 'Aqabat Fiḡ in the Golan heights, al-ʕUlā in northwestern Saudi Arabia, Qaṣr al-Kharāna in Jordan, and Qā' banī Murr in northwestern Saudi Arabia.

the other hand, long been observed that, unlike in the Ḥijāzī dialect, *hamz* did exist in the dialect of Arabic spoken by the Nabataeans, as evidenced by its representation – using the *alif* – in the Arabic names in the Nabataean onomasticon (Diem 1976: 256; cf. also Van Putten forthcoming). Furthermore, the examples produced here, just like those discovered by Imbert, all are from the early Islamic period. The fact that the attestations of the proto-*hamza* 1) are all from the Nabataean realm; 2) preserve a phoneme that existed in the Nabataean (as well as some other) dialects, but not in the Ḥijāzī and several other dialects; and 3) are only attested in the first century of Islam indicates that, firstly, the proto-*hamza* was very likely a regional orthographic convention, and that, secondly, it was part of a distinct orthographic tradition that developed in Provincia Arabia in early Islamic times, some of whose features and conventions made their way into the orthographic tradition that eventually became dominant in later centuries and some – such as the proto-*hamza* – eventually died (or were phased) out.²⁵

If this conjecture is valid, it constitutes further evidence for the contention that the situation in pre-Islam was one of a plurality of orthographic traditions, as argued by Al-Jallad (al-Shdaifat et al. 2017: 322–323). It is now increasingly becoming clear that, contrary to what the foundation myths claim, the Old Arabic language was a multifarious idiom, and concrete evidence for a unitary high variety of that language (the so-called ‘poetic koine’) is still wanting (cf. Al-Jallad 2018 and Al-Jallad forthcoming); it would thus have been only natural for such a language to have also evolved more than one orthographic tradition throughout the vast and politically heterogeneous expanse of territory in which it was common currency. The proto-*hamza* might have developed in the later stages of the pre-Islamic period or in Islamic times, but it almost certainly belongs to a tradition quite distinct from the predominant ‘Ḥijāzī’-based orthographic tradition of later centuries.²⁶

Address for Correspondence: mehdyshaddel@gmail.com

²⁵In the light of the fact that the inscription mentioning ‘Yazīd the king’ exhibits pre-Islamic features, it is also possible that the proto-*hamza*, and the tradition to which it belongs, started out in late pre-Islamic times.

²⁶Note that the representation of *hamza*, along with other vowels, in early Quranic documents by dots (for which see, e.g., George 2015) almost certainly belongs to a different orthographic tradition that developed well after the rise of Islam.

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