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

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

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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.
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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 muʾminin and qaraʾ-hu, using two dots (that is, as المو:مٮٮں and الءامٮٮٮٮس and ٯرا:ه). His final specimen is a rajaz poem inscribed on a rock in Qāʾ bani Murr and contains a word that appears as عرزًا. Imbert reads the word as ‘azāʾa 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 Burquʿ in northeastern Jordan, a graffito invoking God to protect an enigmatic ‘Yazid-w the king’ exhibits what appears to be a dot representing the glottal stop atop the alif of the word al-ʾilāh. 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 ʾākara l-ilāh, produces the proper noun Yazid with wawation (yzydw), and exhibits some other orthographic idiosyncrasies that are reminiscent of pre-Islamic Christian Arabic orthographic conventions. Nevertheless, the Yazid of this inscription is likely identified with the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Muʿāwiya (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

¹ For an overview of the status quaeestionis, along with many new insights, see Van Putten (forthcoming).
² Al-Ghabbān 2017: 480, however, reads it as ǧazā, ignoring the dot.
Figure 1: ‘Abd al-Malik’s monumental inscription from ‘Aqabat Fiq, 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).
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Figure 2: The inscription mentioning ‘Yazid the king’. Note the dot atop the alif of ‘ilāh.

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-qat‘ – 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 ‘Alī al-Ǧabbān and Ḥayāt al-Kilābī in 1999 in the region of Qā‘ al-Mu‘tadil, between al-‘Ušīl and
Madāʾin 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 ʿUmar ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb (r. 13–23 AH).³

2.1 The undated inscription of Zuhayr

Transcription, translation, and tracing:

‘I am Zuhayr, the client of Ibnat Shayba.’

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

The alif of ḍanā 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 ḍanā 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 ḍanā 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 ḍanā, 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 ḍanā 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.

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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.’
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 the onym 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 *ʾanā* 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 *ʾanā* 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 *šīn* of *ʿišrīn*, which I have retained in my tracing, though this is not to say that they definitely are dots.

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

\(^9\)Cf. 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 onym al-ilāh, which he will discuss in a future publication.

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

\(^11\)There 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, Yazid ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Salūli, from 27 AH, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥayr al-Ḥijrī, from the year 31, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥālid ibn al-ʿĀṣ, from 40, and Judaym ibn ʿAli ibn Hubayra, from 52, feature no dots. The inscription of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Dayrām, from the year 46, features only one dot; the foundation inscription of a dam built by Muʿāwiya in Ṭāʾif 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 Ḥnas papyrus), from the year 22 AH, is twelve. The odds, then, are that most of those are simply scratches on the surface of the rock.

The dating of the inscription using two formulae – the death of the caliph ʿUmar 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) of Ḥaybar. 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’ (ʿām buniya l-masjid al-ḥarām li-sanat ʿāmān wa-sābʿūn; al-Ḥāriṯī 2007 [1428]). Two further inscriptions from the early second century AH are double-dated to when ‘the Banū Ḥātim died… the year 117’ (wa-fihi tuwuffū banī [sic] ḥātim… wa-huwa fi sanat sabʿa [sic] wa-miʿa; Sharon 2004: 179–180); and ‘the year 119, during the caliphate of Hišām’ (sanat tisʿ ašāra wa-miʿa ʿalā ḥilāfat hišām; Sharon 2004: 179).

13 It 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.
14 Macdonald is inclined to read this word as mufsad, but, even in the sense of ‘destruction’, mafsad probably makes better sense.
15 Ghabban (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.
16 I 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 ʿUmar 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 ʿUmar died’ (\textit{zaman tuwuffiya ʿumar}), which could theoretically be (slightly earlier) in the previous year, rather than ‘in the year ʿUmar died’.

\section{The inscription of Qays the scribe}

This graffito was discovered in Taymāʾ, northwestern Saudi Arabia, by Muḥammad al-Nājīm of the Taymāʾ museum and was subsequently documented as part of the Saudi–British–German project ‘Epigraphy and the Ancient Landscape in the Hinterland of Taymāʾ’, led by Muḥammad al-Nājīm, 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 ʿUṯmān ibn ʿAffān (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.\(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\)The rather wide array of authorities quoted by Ibn ʿAsākir (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-Tabari (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-Masʿūdī (2005 [1425]: ii: 240); al-Balāḏūrī (1996 [1417]: x: 439); Ibn Saʿd (2001 [1421]: iii: 338); and al-Yaʿqūbī (2010 [1431]: ii: 52), who all put it at four days before the end of the year. Ḥalīfa ibn Ḥayyāṭ (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.

\(^{18}\)Imbert (2015: 65–66). Unfortunately, this edition lacks a tracing and contains some errors. Imbert also failed to take notice of the dots atop the \textit{alif}s.

\(^{19}\)On this episode, see Hinds (1972).
Transcription, translation, and tracing:

1. أنا قيس أ
2. لكتب أبو كثير لعن
3. من الله من
4. قتل عثمان بن عفان
5. ومن أحث [sic] 21 قتله
6. [sic] 21 قتلا
7. 45
‘I am Qays the scribe, Abū Kuṭayyir. May God curse whoever killed ʿUṭmān ibn ʿAffān and whoever precipitated his death.’

Commentary:

Significantly, the inscription features no dots in polyphonic glyphs such as yāʾ, tāʾ, tāʾ, nūn, and qāf. There are, however, two dots atop the alif’s of the words ʿībn in line 5 and ʿaḥṭṭa 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 ʿanā and ʿabū do

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

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-qaf, which is reminiscent of the total inconsistency in the use of diacritical dots in the early Arabic script. 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 /ʾabn/ or /iiban/ in the dialect of the engraver. We cannot be certain if the word was realised /ʾabn/ 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 ابن and يبن) might lend further credence to the hypothesis that in many ancient dialects of Arabic the alif of ibn was always pronounced.

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

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). It has, on

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22 It 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.

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

24 Imbert’s four specimens are from, respectively, ‘Aqabat Fiq in the Golan heights, al-ʿUlā in northwestern Saudi Arabia, Qaṣr al-Kharāna in Jordan, and Qāʾ bani 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

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25 In 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.

26 Note 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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