Descendants and ancestors: a study of Arabic inscriptions from the Arabian Peninsula (1st-4th c. AH/7th-10th c. CE)

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Conclusion

This dissertation is a direct response to the explosion of discoveries of Arabic inscriptions from Islamic Arabia. The establishment of the "Department of Antiquities and Museums", currently called the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, in 1972 marks the beginning of the serious study of Arabic inscriptions from Islamic Arabia. A fair number of Arabic inscriptions from Arabia dating to the 1st-3rd/7th-9th centuries have been published since then. In recent decades, the number of inscriptions known has, however, grown exponentially as a result of the ongoing surveys conducted by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage in cooperation with international institutions, as well as the discoveries by amateur archeologists made public via social media and internet websites. Such revelations provoked the excitement and high expectations of the scholarly community so eager to gain increased knowledge about the earliest community of Muslims and the environment in which Islam was born.

The rising interest in Arabic inscriptions from Islamic Arabia prompted studies into an array of subjects, including examinations of the formulas that appear in the inscriptions, such as Qurʾanic verses, poetry and references to holy war and martyrdom, dated inscriptions or those listing well-known figures from Islamic history. Scholars agree that the majority of Arabic inscriptions dating to the 1st/7th-8th century have been discovered on the Arabian Peninsula, especially from modern day Saudi Arabia.[600] Due to the many surveys currently going on in Saudi Arabia this number is still increasing: from the 11 inscriptions dated to the first fifty years of Hijra, only 1 was discovered outside of Saudi Arabia, in Egypt to be precise (see the overview in Appendix One).

Despite the quick rate at which new epigraphic evidence becomes available, only a handful of scholars has attempted to write a historical study using a meaningful correlated corpus of these

[600] Imbert, "*L'slam des pierres*," 2: 37-38.

inscriptions. One of the main objectives of the current study is to show how this might be done. In this dissertation I (1) gathered a coherent corpus of published and unpublished inscriptions; (2) transcribed and translated these inscriptions; (3) employed historical methods to reflect on the importance of using Arabic epigraphy to examine the genealogy of the earliest generations of Muslims who resided in the Arabian Peninsula and, to the extent this is currently possible, their epigraphic habit.

The core of this dissertation is formed by 260 Arabic inscriptions discovered in different regions in the Arabian Peninsula, 145 of which are published here for the first time. By far, the majority of the texts, 244 to be exact, are so-called graffiti. These are unofficial personal writings consisting of short texts that contain the name of the person that left the inscription (or in whose name it was left) and a short pious message. Most graffiti are found on the outskirts of Medina while the remainder are located in the following locations: al-ʿUlā, al-Bāḥa, Tabūk, Najrān, Mecca, and Khaybar. Another fifteen inscriptions are taken from gravestones originating in the cemeteries in Mecca, Medina, ʿAsham and the Ḥijāz. A foundational inscription that is included in this study, was found in Medina. The edition and translation of these inscriptions can be found in Part Two.

In this corpus, there are fourteen dated texts ranging from the year 40 /660-661 to the year 304 /916-917 (see Chapter Two, table 1). The undated texts can be roughly dated based on information gathered from the biography of the persons mentioned in them and the paleography of the writings. On this basis, we can provide a chronological classification for the undated texts as follows: 16 inscriptions can be dated to the 1st/7th century; 64 between the 1st-2nd/8th centuries; 67 from the 2nd /8th-9th century; 63 between the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries; 18 from the 3rd/9th century; and, finally, 18 from the 4th/10th century. The methods of selecting, dating and evaluating the inscriptions are discussed in Chapter Two, sections 2.5, 2.5.1 and 2.5.2.

The inscriptions name the descendants of four companions of the prophet Muḥammad: al-Mughīra al-Makhzūmī 9 inscriptions, ʿUmar son of al-Khaṭṭāb 138 inscriptions, al-Zubayr son of al-ʿAwwām 89 inscriptions, and Abū ʿAbs 24 inscriptions. Only one inscription in this corpus can be ascribed to a companion of the Prophet: Khālid son of al-ʿĀṣ (inscription 1.1). The four families represented in the epigraphic records are discussed in Chapter Three. In Chapter Two, I explain how and why I selected these particular inscriptions that belong to these families, from the much larger collection of graffiti and other inscriptions that is now available.

This dissertation casts light on a corpus of published and unpublished inscriptions, referring to 106 individuals. It raises the following questions: What inscriptions do we have related to the above-mentioned families? Who are the individuals attested in the inscriptions? Do they appear in the Muslim literary sources? And why did these people leave inscriptions? As an overarching exercise I have tried to answer the question how this large and still growing corpus of short graffiti can be used as a meaningful historical source in a broader context.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Arabic epigraphy remains an underdeveloped field with only a small number of the available inscriptions having been published. The epigraphic records that form the topic of this dissertation have expanded our knowledge of this material in several important ways. This dissertation has shown that the Arabian Peninsula is rich in Arabic inscriptions that date back to the early Islamic period. The editions in Part Two of the dissertation add a significant number of new editions of Arabic inscriptions related to well-known families from early Islamic history. By combining related inscriptions, I was, moreover, able to correct several older editions. This dissertation also aims to show that, when examined in a meaningful combination, these inscriptions form a unique historical source. To date, our knowledge of genealogy in Islam has been based on genealogical and biographical sources. This dissertation studies a group of related

inscriptions which were cross-examined with early Muslim genealogical works in order to discern the authenticity and accuracy of the information contained in them. In doing so, two types of source material have been examined: documentary (inscriptions) and Muslim literary sources.

One important conclusion of this dissertation is that there is a considerable degree of overlap between the information about the members of the four families descending from companions of the prophet Muḥammad as found in the inscriptions and as presented by the genealogical books. Maybe even more importantly, also in the cases where the two kind of sources do not entirely overlap, they do not contradict each other either. What we mean by that is that we sometimes find names in the genealogical books that are missing from the epigraphy or vice versa, but this is not due to these people being 'made up'. Rather they did exist, but the disappearance of individuals from the narrative sources as well as the small number of existing differences in the first four generations can be explained by one of nine reasons listed in Chapter Four.

The strong general overlap between the two types of sources, seems to confirm the general trustworthiness of both types of sources. As such we can in fact use their discrepancies to further our historical knowledge. The inscriptions inform us about individuals absent from the genealogical sources. In combination with the sources, inscriptions can thus help us decide whether a particular lineage died out or continued to exist, and for how long it existed. This is especially valuable when genealogical sources report the end of a family line or simply stop reporting about a family line, while the inscriptions show additional family members in existence. The first example of this relates to ʿUmar's family. According to Ibn Saʿd, one of ʿUmar's great-grand grandsons, ʿĀṣim son of ʿUmar son of Ḥafṣ, had no children (Chapter Three, section 3.4.2). Surprisingly, a graffito engraved by a son of ʿĀṣim called Jaʿfar (inscription 2.77) is found, thereby casting a serious doubt on the accuracy of the information reported by Ibn Saʿd.

The second example concerns two individuals from al-Zubayr's family, whose names were found on gravestones. Two gravestones list two later descendants of Ṣāliḥ son of ʿAbbād son of ʿAbd Allāh son of al-Zubayr (inscriptions 3.15-16), while two genealogists, al-Zubayrī and Ibn Ḥazm, indicated that Ṣāliḥ's line had died out. This is opposed to al-Zubayr ibn Bakkār who argued that the family line did continue. The two inscriptions function as a tiebreaker and confirm that the line continued to exist.

Inscriptions also allow us to reconstruct family-trees up to several generations beyond the information known from the narrative sources. For example, we were able to trace the family of ʿUmar up to the 10th generation and the family of al-Zubayr up to the 11th generation.

The comparison of inscriptions and narrative sources brings up some interesting results: out of 106 individuals, there are 58 'missing' from the *nasab, ṭabaqāt* and historical sources (Chapter Three). These can be divided as follows: 2 individuals out of 6 from the descendants of al-Mughīra are unknown, 16 out of 39 from the family of ʿUmar remain unidentified, 35 out of 54 from the family of al-Zubayr are unidentifiable, and 5 out of 7 members of the family of Abū ʿAbs were missing in the literary sources. Thus using the inscriptions, we can add previously unknown family members to their respective family trees. One exception, however, pertains to 13 members from al-Zubayr's family whose origins remain unidentified (see Chapter Three, section 3.5.5).

Information about the descendants of al-Mughīra, who lived in the 1st/7th century, is available in the sources up to the 3rd generation. On the other hand, the other two members from the 3rd/9th century (inscriptions 1. 8-9) are missing from the biographical works. With regard to the family of ʿUmar, we start to miss individuals from the 5th generation onwards, corresponding with the 2nd/ 8th century. In the 5th generation, we found one family member attested in the graffiti who was not known from the literary record. However, the real discrepancy between the two kinds of sources

starts from the 6th generation onwards where the epigraphic record allowed us to substantially expand the family tree. Though in our corpus a fairly large number of inscriptions relate to al-Zubayr's family, many of the members of this family are missing from the classical genealogical sources. In this family, the first member to be missing from the sources was in the 4th generation and his name is ʿUmar son of Muṣʿab son of ʿUrwa (inscription 3.57). That is to say, information about the members of this family began to be lacking in the narrative sources in the 2nd/8th century. Finally, of the members of the family of Abū ʿAbs listed in the inscriptions belonging to the 3rd and 4th generations, 5 out of 7 are missing from the literary sources.

To reiterate one of the most important conclusions of this dissertation: graffiti were produced from the 1st-3rd/7th-9th centuries with a spike in the 2nd-3rd/8th-9th century and a sharp decline from the 3rd/9th century onwards. Audience is the key to understand this change in graffiti production. A desire to be remembered and taking pride in one's family were, I suggested, the main reasons behind writing inscriptions at the same site. Sons mostly wrote their inscriptions at the same site where their father had left his own writings, suggesting the family kept returning to this location for at least two generations. Many examples prove this hypothesis. For instance, Khālid son of al-ʿĀṣ and his two sons and his grandson, all inscribed their names on the same rock in al-Bāḥa; *Ruwāwa* hosted the inscriptions of ʿUmar's descendants; Muzj hosted the inscriptions of al-Zubayr's; and al-Ṣuwaydira hosted the inscriptions of Abū ʿAbs's.

Let us take a closer look at inscriptions left at the same site. In Ruwāwa, for example, six generations from the family of ʿUmar, between the 3rd and 8th generation, marked their presence by leaving inscriptions all at the same site. We see an inscription belonging to ʿUbayd Allāh son of ʿAbd Allāh son of ʿUmar from the 3rd generation, and another belonging to al-Fārūq son of Zayd al-ʿUmarī from the 8th generation and of different family members in between. For around two

centuries, members of the same family, though belonging to two different branches, occupied the site and left their inscriptions. From the site of Ruwāwa alone, 137 inscriptions are used in this dissertation, 116 of which belong to the family of ʿUmar. In al-Ṣuwaydira, 22 inscriptions out of 24 belong to Abū ʿAbs's family.

The examination shows how individuals, whose lineage extended back several generations, endeavor to link their names to their forefathers by listing their an elaborate version of their family line. By contrast, other individuals decided to leave out their full lineage, relying on the surrounding inscriptions. This trend is most noticeable in Ruwāwa. To name one example, the six sons of ʿUmar son of Ḥafṣ son of ʿĀṣim preferred to list the short version of their names because their uncle, Rabāḥ, used his full linage at the shared site (inscription 2.37) where they left theirs. Two generations later, the 7th generation of the same branch used the last name '*al-ʿUmarī*'. In the very same site, only one example of the descendant of ʿUmar son of Ḥafṣ son of ʿĀṣim used the name 'son of al-Khaṭṭāb' This person's name is al-Fārūq son of Zayd (inscription 2.136) who belonged to the 8th generation.

Judging from the number of graffiti left after the 3rd century, we can assume that engraving one's name, lineage and a pious phrase in stone in the form of a graffito had become unpopular or irrelevant by the 3th/9th century. The decline of the tendency to leave epigraphs can be explained by two reasons. I have argued that neither the need to record one's lineage nor the desire to ask for God's forgiveness disappeared; however, they gave up the tradition through which these sentiments were expressed. The puzzling question is why did the tradition of inscriptions become outdated or lost its popularity? First, we notice that the tradition of inscriptions declined with the advent of the paper. Second: rather than inscribing the prayer for forgiveness on the rock, it was replaced by an audible supplication. By the 3rd/9th century after the decline of graffiti, there was

an emerging trend of writing on gravestones, especially in Mecca. It took the following format: writing the genealogy of the deceased, subtitled by a pious phrase, and ending with a prayer for the forgiveness of the deceased. Thus, informal inscriptions were replaced by formal ones, a trend that reflects the economic and social flourishing of society. To reiterate, extensive research on the economic and social transformations, as reflected in the presence and form of inscriptions, must be conducted before making any final conclusions. I hope this dissertation has clearly demonstrated the importance of collating various sources to consider inscriptions as an expression of the society that produced them.

The exact beginning of the writing of inscriptions cannot be tied to a specific generation over all, but this analysis demonstrates how it started with the early generations of Muslims in each of the studied four families. Nevertheless, I was not able to give a reason for the discrepancy in the generational starting point that exists between the families. The inscriptions of Khālid son of al-ʿĀṣ (inscription 1.1) dates to the 1st generation with those of his two sons ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and al-Ḥārith belonging to the 2nd generation, and those of his grandson belonging to the 3rd generation. All these inscriptions were by the way left on the same rock. In the family of al-Zubayr, the first inscriptions belong to ʿAmr son of al-Zubayr from the 2nd generation. In the family of ʿUmar, family members started to leave inscriptions in the 3rd generation with ʿUbayd Allāh son of ʿAbd Allāh son of ʿUmar (inscription 2.1). In the family of Abū ʿAbs, the first inscriptions were left by al-Qāsim son of Muḥammad (inscriptions 4.1-8), ʿAbd al-Malik son of Muḥammad (inscriptions 4.13-15), Maslama son of Muḥammad (inscription 4.16) and Maymūn son of Zayd (inscriptions 4. 23-24) who all belonged to the 3rd generation.

Some other observations can be made about the preference of these first generations of Muslims in the production of their inscriptions. It was a common practice to leave more than one inscription at the same site or in different sites. For example, ʿĀṣim son of ʿUmar son of Ḥafṣ (inscriptions 2.66-76) left 11 inscriptions in Ruwāwa; al-Qāsim son of Muḥammad son of Abū ʿAbs left 8 inscriptions at the same site (inscriptions 4. 1-8). On the other hand, individuals like Rabāḥ son of Ḥafṣ son of ʿĀṣim left inscriptions at two sites (inscriptions 2.37-38); Muḥammad son of Yaʿqūb son of ʿAbd al-Wahhāb son of Yaḥyā left inscriptions at three sites (inscriptions 3.5-14); and Zayd son of ʿUmar son of Ḥafṣ at four sites (inscriptions 2.78-86). Often these places were linked to the place of residence or activity of the families leaving inscriptions in these places (Chapter Five).

Turning to the various ways in which the individuals in our corpus identified themselves on the rock, either by their first name or last name, Rabāḥ son of Ḥafṣ son of ʿĀṣim (inscriptions 2.37-38) was the only example to use his nickname instead of his real name ʿĪsā.

In general, individuals followed no fixed pattern when engraving their last names. This is apparent when we examine the inscriptions belonging to three families in our corpus. First, the descendants of al-Mughīra used three different ways to identify their last name, namely al-Mughīra, al-ʿĀṣ, and al-Makhzūmī. Second: the members of the family of ʿUmar who left 138 inscriptions, showed a lot of diversity in using the last name. From the 3rd to 10th generations, five different last names are in use: al-Khaṭṭāb, ibn ʿUmar, al-ʿUmarī, Āl ʿUmar, and al-Fārūq. In this family, we also find cases in which one individual used different last names in different inscriptions; Rabāḥ son of Ḥafṣ son of ʿĀṣim son of ʿUmar (inscriptions 2.37-38) used al-Khaṭṭāb once (inscription 2.37), and al-Fārūq once as well (inscription 2.38). ʿUthmān son of ʿUbayd Allāh son of ʿAbd Allāh used ibn ʿUmar three times (inscriptions 2.3-5) and al-Fārūq once (inscription 2. 2). These two belong to the same 4th generation. Finally, the same practice reappeared in the 8th generation. Al-Fārūq son

of Zayd, for example, once used the last name al-ʿUmarī (inscription 2.135) and once al-Khaṭṭāb (inscription 2.136). In the family of al-Zubayr, four ways of using the last name are attested: Ibn al-Zubayr, al-Zubayrī, Ibn al-ʿAwwām and al-Asadī. In our corpus, inscriptions with tribal affiliation are uncommon with the exception of al-Qurashī (inscription 3.19); al-Makhzūmī twice (inscriptions 1.8-9), and al-Asadī (inscription 3.19). The family of Abū ʿAbs shows no variety in the last name; Abū ʿAbs appears in all 13 inscriptions where a last name is added (inscriptions 4.1-24).

In addition, it is also important to see how *mawālī* and slaves linked themselves to famous people. Four instances appear in our corpus: the *mawlā* of ʿUmar's grandson Ḥafṣ son of ʿĀṣim son of ʿUmar (inscriptions 2.39-40) used al-Fārūq as his last name; three *mawālī* of al-Zubayr's family linked themselves to al-Zubayr. They were called al-Mundhir (inscription 3.35), ʿUrwa (inscription 3.51), and ʿAmr (inscription 3.64).

The field of Arabic inscriptions from Islamic Arabia today is very dynamic, with many inscriptions being newly discovered daily. This fast growing corpus increasingly attracts scholarly attention with publications of editions and related bodies of inscriptions as an outcome. Even though there is a significant growth in studies in this sub-field, it is clear that using Arabic inscriptions to examine the society that produced them is still in its epigraphic infancy. The discipline has only just begun to develop in the last few decades with only a small number of studies – mostly editions of inscriptions – and little discussion on the content of the inscriptions. As more and more Arabic inscriptions come to light and undergo proper academic study under the umbrella of broader historical questions, we can develop our knowledge of the society that produced these writings. Scholars have gathered all ancient Arabian inscriptions that have been discovered to date, both published and unpublished, in two databases: one dedicated to Ancient North Arabia and another

to Ancient South Arabia. However, these databases focus on ancient inscriptions and do not include the Arabic inscriptions. Hopefully, in the near future, as scholars around the world collect more inscriptions, a mother database containing all Arabiac inscriptions from both the pre-Islamic and the Islamic period can be set up. Though I discussed shortly in Chapter Five how the inscriptions show some continuity of traditions on the Arabian Peninsula from pre-Islamic to Islamic times, this was not the focus of my thesis. This interesting question would deserve much more research as it could shed light on how early Islam was either embedded in or changed habits in Arabian society.

In this dissertation I have discussed the inscriptions in their natural environment (Chapter Five), to further the study of epigraphy in its context significantly, it would be necessary to include information on the place where the inscriptions were found, the geographical and built context, the relation to other inscriptions, and other features, such as roads, grazing grounds and other places of human activity, in the landscape that the inscriptions interacted with. As became clear in this research, studying these inscriptions is not just about the text, but also to a large extend about their context; they only start making sense when we connect them to their surroundings. Crucially, there are still plenty of regions in Saudi Arabia that need to be surveyed. Only with more inscriptions can we study properly early Islamic history, including the religious practices, prosopography, and the epigraphic habit of the inhabitants of early Islamic Arabia. The insights discussed in my Chapter Five are hampered by the fact that more inscriptions and a better understanding of the function of writing and literacy in this society is needed before we can really start to answer questions about the reasons of why people left inscriptions. Since the exercise of this dissertation was to show the inscriptions' potential for historical research, I wanted to indicate venues in which our research might lead.

Most importantly, however, I hope to have shown that although at first sight the function of these brief inscriptions seems purely religious, at closer examination and by putting them in their historical and environmental context, these Arabic inscriptions of Islamic Arabia, hold a wealth of historical data that should be applied well beyond the scope of religion.