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

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## Abstract

Although only having come into existence in earnest some fifty years ago, the field of Arabic epigraphy from Islamic Arabia is very dynamic. New inscriptions are discovered continuously in large numbers engaging the scholarly community eager to learn more about the earliest history of Islam as well as the wider public, whose amateur finds are shared quickly and widely via social media. The result has been the publication of editions and studies of related texts. Early Arabic inscriptions have not received substantial attention for their historical value as far as making a cross-examination with the works of *nasab* “genealogy” and *ṭabaqāt* “classes”. This dissertation aims to show how Arabic inscriptions, when studied in meaningful corpora, can be used as valuable sources for genealogical and historical studies. In this dissertation I (1) gathered a coherent corpus of published and unpublished inscriptions; (2) transcribed and translated these inscriptions; (3) employed historical methods to reflect on the importance of using Arabic epigraphy to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 corpus studied in this dissertation is formed by the inscriptions left by members of four families, whose ancestral lines begin with four Companions of the Prophet. In total 260 inscriptions are studied, 145 of which are published here for the first time. The majority of the inscriptions are graffiti (244), in addition to 15 gravestones and 1 foundational inscription. They name 106 different individuals. The corpus is collected from different regions in Saudi Arabia, but the Medina region is the host of the largest number. Three of the families belong to the tribe of the Prophet, Quraysh, namely the descendant of al-Mughīra al-Makhzūmī, ‘Umar son of al-Khaṭṭāb, and al-Zubayr son of al-‘Awwām. The family of Abū ‘Abs, the fourth, is from al-Anṣār.

The dissertation focuses on several aspects of the Islamic tradition to explore the connection between the names that appear in the epigraphic records and the genealogical sources. It studies extended families such as the descendants of ‘Umar stretching from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> generation whose names appear on the epigraphic records. The corpus helps to reconstruct the family trees beyond the information presently known from genealogical sources. It also identifies why individuals, whose names are found in the epigraphic record, are absent or missing from the narrative sources. The corpus offers answers to genealogical questions about whether or not the family line died out. Finally, this dissertation examines the idea of the epigraphic habit in the Arabian Peninsula in general and how individuals who belong to the same family identified themselves.

It consists of two parts: Part 1 is divided into five chapters besides the conclusion. Part 2 presents the editions and the translation of the inscriptions that form the core of this dissertation. Chapter 1 explores the history of the field of Arabic epigraphy, highlighting the official beginning of the field by the establishment of the “Department of Antiquities and Museums”, currently called the “Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage” in 1972. It also discusses the claims of inauthenticity levelled against Arabic inscriptions. Scholars of this field have not agreed on the proper label of these inscriptions; some labeled them *Islamic* while others labeled them *Arabic* or *Arabo-Islamic*. I suggest the label “Arabic”. Moreover, most recent studies focused on editing Arabic inscriptions without attempting to understand or analyze them. This chapter also discusses how inscriptions are used in different fields of Islamic studies like the study of Islamic history, that of the Arabic script and religious studies.

Chapter 2 shows the criteria that conditioned the selection of this corpus as well as the identification system necessary to make accurate judgments about the names that appear in the

epigraphic records. This chapter also gives the geographic outline of the dissertation. Most of the corpus comes from the Medina region while the rest of the inscriptions are collected from al-‘Ulā, Mecca, Tabūk, al-Bāḥa, Najrān, ‘Asham, the Ḥijāz and Khaybar. In this corpus, there are fourteen inscriptions dated between 40/660-661 and 304/916-917, and the rest have been dated in correspondence with the biography of the individuals named or by the inscriptions’ paleography. Chapter 3 presents the four families that appear in the inscriptions with a special focus on identifying individuals listed or unlisted in the genealogical sources. Chapter 3 discusses discrepancies between the inscriptions and the sources. The epigraphic records provide evidence that help ascertain whether or not the lineage of these families survived. The results show that there is a disparity between the two sources. The names in the corpus are divided into two main categories: identifiable and unidentifiable individuals. The latter group is further divided in two categories: the first category consists of individuals whose lineages are known without any additional information being available about who they were. The second category contains individuals who can only be connected to a family in general terms, but who remain otherwise anonymous because they have not engraved their full lineages. The chapter concludes that there are 58 unidentified individuals out of the 106 that appear on the epigraphic records.

Chapter 4 studies the so-called “missing people”, the chapter lists nine reasons why some people are missing from the Muslim sources even though their origins are known. Importantly, the comparison between the literary and epigraphic sources in this dissertation have shown a remarkable degree of consistency for the first 4-5 generations. After this moment the two kinds of sources diverge more prominently, which can be explained by the fact that the authors or compilers of the great *nasab* works belonged to the 6<sup>th</sup> generation.

Chapter 5 analyzes the epigraphic habits traced in this corpus and in the Muslim world. It also discusses the self-identification and how individuals presented themselves in the inscriptions. This chapter shows that some families left inscriptions at the same site for several generations. For example, we found the inscriptions of 6 generations of 'Umar's family, precisely from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup>, at the site of Ruwāwa. This reflects the settlement of the descendants in their forefathers' regions and for the Umar family we can establish that they continued to live in/ frequented the same region at least up to the 8<sup>th</sup> generation. We argued that the popularity of identifying oneself within a genealogy stretching back across several generations was an important feature of this society, which for some reason was fulfilled in other ways from the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century onwards when graffiti declined sharply. Importantly, the decrease of the production of graffiti coincides with an apparent rise in the manufacture of gravestones and it is possible that the presentation of genealogical family relations on gravestones made the need to do so in graffiti superfluous. The decline of the epigraphic habit might be explained by two reasons the first being that it became an old fashioned. Another possible explanation is that the religious function of graffiti, to ask for God's forgiveness, was replaced by prayer.

The dissertation concludes by stating that inscriptions constitute an essential source for historical genealogical studies. Inscriptions bring to light previously unknown individuals allowing for the completing family trees and, in some cases, correcting or clarifying information on branches dying out. Studying inscriptions in their natural and built environment and in relation to surrounding inscriptions, the dissertation also found that it was very common during the early Islamic period that several generations of the same family left inscriptions at a single site.