Valentina A. Grasso, Ana Davitashvili, Nadja Abuhussein

Introduction. Epigraphy, the Qurʾān, and the Religious Landscape of Arabia

Abstract: A wide range of archaeological finds is rapidly expanding our knowledge of the pre-Islamic cultural milieu and the political structures of the Arabian Peninsula during Late Antiquity, and thereby of the Qurʾān's cultural context. This material can offer a complementary reading to the literary accounts on pre-Islamic Arabia, which were mostly composed outside of Arabia or long after the late antique period. There is a growing need to make the recent exciting discoveries of scholars working on the Qurʾān and Arabia more widely accessible to historians who may not have a solid background in archaeology and epigraphy. As such, the ERC project "The Qur'an as a Source for Late Antiquity" (QaSLA) organized a conference, titled "Epigraphy, the Qur'an, and the Religious Landscape of Arabia", which took place in Tübingen on 8–10 September 2022. The three-day international conference brought together specialists in epigraphy as well as scholars of the Qurʾān to explore how recent epigraphic and archaeological findings and research have been changing our understanding of the Qurʾān and the Arabian religious, cultural, and political landscape. Accordingly, the conference sought to integrate new archaeological finds with ongoing studies on the genesis of the Qurʾān, its Arabian background, and the broader cultural milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia with a special focus on the dawn of Islam. The conference also featured an important contribution by Peter Webb on pre-Islamic poetry, another neglected corpus of inquiry into the history of pre-Islamic Arabia. Aiming to foster discussion between scholars, each panel was paired with a specialist on the Qurʾān or the wider history of Arabia.

Given the diverse nature of our audience, this introduction will first offer some basic information on the importance of pre-Islamic Arabian epigraphy and poetry and then segue into a brief summary of the burgeoning field of Qurʾanic studies. It will conclude with a summary of the papers that were included in this publication and with an evaluation of their impact on the field of Qurʾanic studies.

We thank Holger Zellentin for his suggestions.

As a contribution to the conference "Epigraphy, the Qur'an, and the Religious Landscape of Arabia", the writing of this article has benefitted from funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement id: 866043).

Valentina A. Grasso, Bard College, vgrasso@bard.edu
Ana Davitashvili, University of Tübingen, ana.davitashvili@uni-tuebingen.de
Nadja Abuhussein, University of Tübingen, nadja.abuhussein@uni-tuebingen.de

https://doi.org/10.1515/mill-2023-0002

1 Pre-Islamic Arabian Epigraphy

1.1 Ancient South Arabian

Over 15,000 South Arabian inscriptions date from the late second millennium BCE to the sixth century CE. However, only about fifty South Arabian epigraphic documents are dated according to a year that appears to have been lunar-solar. Before the first century CE, paleography remains the best tool to uncover the dating of the corpus. The mention of Sabean rulers in Assyrian texts and several historical events found in other "external sources" (e.g., the mention of an Egyptian revolt against the Achaemenids in the fourth century BCE) further help archaeologists to trace the history of writing in the region. The inscriptions from South Arabia employ one script known as Sabean. This name derives from the fact that it originated in the kingdom of Saba with the capital Maʾrib, the most prominent kingdom of the region between the eighth century BCE and the third century CE. However, the Sabean corpus is written in four different languages (Ḥaḍramitic, Qatabanic, Minaic, and Sabean), named after the four most powerful kingdoms of the area (Ḥaḍramawt, Qatabān, Maʿīn, and Sabaʾ).[1]

- Ḥaḍramitic, attested in the region of Ḥaḍramawt, is the least studied South Arabian dialect. It is attested in hundreds of inscriptions that span a millennium. Ḥaḍramitic monumental inscriptions are attested only after the seventh century CE when the neighboring Saba profoundly influenced the kingdom. Ḥaḍramitic is the dialect once used in the region where eastern Yemen is today found.
- Qatabanic is attested in brief inscriptions, often broken into several pieces, mainly located in the capital of the kingdom of Qatabān, Timna, and its necropolis.
- Minaic is primarily attested in the northern region of South Arabia from the eighth century BCE. However, some Minaic epigraphic evidence was discovered in North-West Arabia (especially Dedan and Hegra) and Egypt and linked to the thriving trade of the Mineans.
- Sabaic is the best attested dialect of South Arabia. It has been documented for a thousand years. The epigraphic evidence dating from the eighth to the fourth century BCE is labeled Early Sabaic. After Middle Sabaic, the inscriptions from the last two centuries of South Arabian history (fourth to sixth CE) are classified as Late Sabaic and linked to the kingdom of Ḥimyar. The latter managed to unify the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula at the dawn of the fourth century after subjugating the nearby kingdoms of Saba' and Ḥaḍramawt between 275 and 300. The last inscriptions of this group date to the 550s, when the kingdom of Ḥimyar entered a declining phase, leading to its collapse and fall to the Sasanians, followed by the Muslim conquests and the establishment of the Caliphate.

1 The most valuable grammar remains Beeston 1984.

– Several Sabean inscriptions were uncovered in Ethiopia and Eritrea at the dawn of the 20th century. These inscriptions are monumental and generally classified as Ethiopic Sabaic.

The Ancient South Arabian corpus comprises monumental inscriptions on stone and precious metals (mainly bronze), seals, incisions on wood sticks and palm leaves, and rock graffiti. Altars or statue bases often feature epigraphic evidence. Professional scribes generally wrote monumental inscriptions according to the instructions of the rulers and elites of the South Arabian kingdoms. The content of monumental inscriptions is highly formulaic and impersonal. Several of them commemorate a religious event or the construction of buildings and public infrastructures. The corpus bears several prescriptive texts too. Contracts, letters, and archival lists constitute the content of the wooden sticks and palm leaves corpus. This corpus is written in cursive, probably by professionals. However, they differ from the monumental inscriptions by using first and second-person pronouns, as their daily-life content makes them less impersonal. Instead, rock graffiti are written by common people who did not receive professional scribal education. They usually contain the author's name (and lineage), even though a brief religious invocation can also be featured similarly to the graffiti attributed to the Ancient North Arabian corpus. They attest that literacy was a widespread practice in the south of the Arabian Peninsula.

Each South Arabian kingdom had a distinct pantheon made of five main deities. The main god of Saba was Almaqah, Qatabān worshipped ʿAmm, Hadramawt Sayīn, and Maʿīn and Ḥimyar ʿAthtar. Several inscriptions dedicated to the gods of the pantheons request health, rainfall, and protection. The last polytheistic inscription of South Arabia dates to 380. After South Arabia's unification under the kingdom of Ḥimyar, the rulers of South Arabia adopted a Scriptural monotheism.[2] Therefore, lexemes such as 'ln ("God," also spelled 'lhn, 'lh, or "lhn), B'l/Mr' S1myn ("Lord of the Heaven," sometimes "of Earth" is added), and Rhmnn ("Merciful") substitute the polytheistic theonyms attested in earlier periods. At the same time, several epigraphic pieces of evidence mention "the People of Israel" (s2'bn Ys3r'l) and the Jews (Hd/Hwd/Yhd), bearing evident Hebrew and Aramaic loanwords. After the massacre of the Christian community of Najrān in 522 (whose presence in South Arabia in the fifth century is attested in the literary and epigraphic sources) and the intervention of the neighboring Christian kingdom of Aksūm, the inscriptions bear Christian formulae, proving that the ruling classes had turned towards Christianity.[3] Ḥimyar remained Christian until its fall to the Sassanians in the second half of the sixth century CE, when the epigraphic evidence of the region ceased to exist, with the possible exception of palm leaf and wood stick documents.[4]

2 Grasso 2020: 352–82; Grasso 2023a.

3 Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd 2014: 1033–128.

4 Stein 2010.

Ancient South Arabian inscriptions can provide valuable insights into the cultural context of the Arabian Peninsula, as suggested by recent studies on the pagan gods mentioned in the Qurʾān and in South Arabian epigraphy. As the corpus offers insights into the religious and cultural practices of pre-Islamic Arabians, it can help us reconstruct the historical and cultural context in which Islam arose.

1.2 Ancient North Arabian

50,000 inscriptions found in southern Syria, south-eastern Jordan, and north-western Saudi Arabia are datable between the early first millennium BCE and the fourth century CE. This corpus is labeled Ancient North Arabian. Most of the inscriptions consist of brief rock graffiti featuring personal names. Scholars usually divide the corpus into several groups: Dadanitic, Hismaic, Safaitic, and Taymanitic. This categorization is based on graphic differences rather than linguistic variants (note the isogloss formed by the determinative article h-, in contrast to ʾal-, the determinative article attested in Old Arabic, mentioned later in this introduction). Many of these inscriptions were discovered in the thriving North Arabian oasis of Dadān, Taymāʾ, and Dūmah, and as such, their dialect is known as "Oasis North Arabian".

While Dumaitic is attested in only a few epigraphic documents found in the oasis of Dūmah in North Arabia, Dadanitic inscriptions are primarily located in the oasis of al-ʿUlā, ancient Dadān in northern Ḥijāz, an important commercial city in the desert of modern Saudi Arabia. Dadān was the capital of the kingdoms of Dadān and Liḥyān. Between 1932 and 2000, scholars used to divide the inscriptions found in the oasis into Dedanite and Lihyanite on the basis of letter shapes, but nowadays, the entire corpus is labeled Dadanitic. Dadanitic is the only Ancient North Arabian dialect that features monumental inscriptions. The corpus of Taymanitic derives its name from the north-western Arabian oasis of Taymāʾ. Taymanitic epigraphic evidence was once considered part of the "Thamudic" corpus as Thamudic A, named on the basis of the corpus's attribution to the inhabitants of Thāmud. The Taymanitic corpus was produced between the ninth and the seventh century BCE and includes seals and hundreds of rock graffiti. Hismaic similarly used to be considered as part of the "Thamudic" corpus, and as such, it used to be known as "Thamudic E". Scholars have relabeled this group of inscriptions as "Hismaic" as they were primarily found in the homonymous desert of Ḥismā between southern Jordan and north-west Saudi Arabia. Hismaic is the only Ancient North Arabian dialect that does not feature a definitive article. However, in a similar fashion to the other groups, most of the Hismaic epigraphic corpus consists of brief graffiti. Thamudic B, C, and D found in the north and central regions of the Arabian Peninsula are still known by the "Thamudic" label and await to be better categorized by scholars. Hismaic has also been called "South Safaitic" in the past, despite being quite distinct from the Safaitic corpus. It is attested in southern Syria, north-eastern Jordan, and Saudi Arabia from the end of the first millennium BCE to the fourth century CE. The Safaitic corpus is named after the volcanic sheets known as Ṣafā. However,

the inscriptions are mainly attested in other parts of the Syrian Ḥarrah (lit. "basalt", referring to the basalt desert of southern Syria and northern Jordan). Scholars have discovered Safaitic inscriptions in Palmyra, Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ, and Pompeii too, but they were written mainly by nomads in the Arabian Peninsula. Finally, Hasaitic epigraphic evidence mainly comprises north-eastern Arabian epitaphs written in the Sabean Ancient South Arabian script.

Literacy in the region appears to have been widespread. Ancient North Arabian inscriptions mostly comprise short graffiti that appear to have been carved by settled people and nomads alike. According to Michael Macdonald, nomads carved inscriptions such as the ones forming the corpus of Safaitic to pass the time.[5] Michael Macdonald has suggested that nomads inhabiting the Syro-Arabian desert wrote the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions to overcome boredom during their often-solidary herding. Writing, however, never replaced mnemonic literature. Yet, as observed by Ahmad al-Jallad, most inscriptions are highly formulaic in content, suggesting that the writers must have been taught how to and what to write, whether for boredom or other reasons. Moreover, although most inscriptions simply contain personal names (using patrilineal genealogies), these names are rarely repeated in different texts, pointing to the fact that the writers did not write more than one graffito in their lifetime. If the motivation behind the inscriptions is really to pass time, we would expect to find several graffiti written by the same individual. Although it seems plausible that many of the inscriptions were epitaphs or produced for other funerary purposes, this explanation cannot be convincingly applied to the whole corpus of Ancient North Arabian epigraphic evidence. Al-Jallad has suggested that writing in Safaitic was a category of rock art subjected to aesthetic and stylistic formulae.[6] It appears likely that more than one purpose led to the redaction of the thousands of graffiti classified as Ancient North Arabian. Writing as a pastime and a funerary or religious motivation may have concurred. Indeed, many inscriptions contain formulaic curses and/or prayers which sometimes point to ritualistic aims, whether asking for protection, requesting rain, or invoking a dead relation. In all cases, the inscriptions are highly formulaic, suggesting they belong to a specific genre and cultural tradition. The inscriptions mentioning sacrifices and pilgrimages were possibly read aloud during religious rituals. The epigraphic evidence remembering a deceased one or an event may have held a similar mnemonic and ceremonial function. Drawings accompany several inscriptions.

Ancient North Arabian inscriptions ceased towards the end of the fourth century CE. Roughly at the same time, an increase in Nabatean-Arabic and Old Arabic inscriptions is registered.[7] Although archaeologists have not discovered Ancient North Arabian inscriptions dating from the late fourth century, it is possible that their scripts were

5 Macdonald 2004; Macdonald 2015: 1–50.

6 Al-Jallad 2015.

7 Macdonald 2008a: 17–27.

used on other supports. However, as the earliest attestations of Arabic coincided with the disappearance of Ancient North Arabian, it is plausible to imagine that a series of cultural changes played a role in the disappearance of epigraphic Ancient North Arabian, and it is possible that migrations in North-West Arabia destabilized the use of local scripts in favor of emerging ones. The relationship between Ancient North Arabian dialects and Arabic is also an object of debate. One of the problems comes from the difficulty of considering Ancient North Arabian dialects as a single linguistic family. Scholars in the past labeled the group as "Proto-Arabic". Although these dialects share a script, they are not necessarily considered a homogenous category. The most noticeable feature that differentiates the Ancient North Arabian corpus from Arabic is the definitive article, being almost usually h- in Ancient North Arabian and ʾal- in Arabic. A series of grammatical peculiarities appear to be shared by Safaitic and Arabic. However, studies on the intertwined history of the Ancient North Arabian corpus and Arabic are still in their infancy.

Ancient North Arabian inscriptions can provide valuable insights into the cultural context of the Arabian Peninsula, as demonstrated by recent studies on literacy which focused on the corpus. Moreover, as the corpus offers insights into the religious and cultural practices of pre-Islamic Arabians (as suggested by recent studies on the pagan gods mentioned in the Qur'an and attested in North Arabia),[8] it can help us reconstruct the historical and cultural context in which Islam arose.

1.3 Old Arabic

A small corpus of inscriptions, between the fourth century and the sixth century CE, have been labeled "Old Arabic" or "Paleo-Arabic" and they are considered to be the "ancestors" of classical Arabic.[9] For example, the corpus features two lines of a Nabataean graffito (ʿOboda); the epitaph of Imruʾ al-Qays (328, al-Namārah); fragments of a graffito (455–56); part of a trilingual inscription (Arabic, Greek, and Syriac) on a lintel of a martyrion (512, Zebed); a graffito (528, Jabal Says); part of a bilingual (Arabic and Greek) inscription on the lintel of a martyrion (568, Ḥarrān); an inscription (sixth and seventh centuries, Qaṣr Burquʿ); an inscription with a cross (548/49, Dūmat al-Jandal); Christian inscriptions (fifth-century, Najrān). A lost inscription (560, monastery of Hind the Elder at Ḥīrah) is preserved in two transcriptions of al-Bakrī (d. 1094) and Yāqūt (d. 1229). An epitaph from Qaryat al-Fāw in South Arabian script and two inscriptions in the Dadanitic script were only written in the Arabic language. Several new inscriptions classified as "Paleo-Arabic" have been found by the Ṭāʾif-Mecca Epigraphic Survey Project, and they are in the process of being published.

8 Grasso 2020: 352–82; Grasso 2023a.

9 Macdonald 2000: 28–79; Macdonald 2008b: 464–77; Nehmé 2010: 47–88; Nehmé 2017: 75–98.

1.4 Pre-Islamic Arabian Poetry

Another significant corpus for the study of late antique Arabia is that constituted by pre-Islamic poetry. The central motifs of pre-Qurʾanic Arabian poems, as they have been identified by both pre-modern and modern scholars, include lamentation before the ruins of the camps (*al-bukāʾ ʿalā l-aṭlāl*), erotic prelude (*nasīb*), description of the poet's journey (*raḥīl*), description of animals and nature (*waṣf*), panegyric (*madīḥ*), self-exaltation (*fakhr*), invectives (*hijāʾ*), and eulogies (*rithāʾ*). Arabian poets were often said to receive inspiration from preternatural creatures known as *jinn*,[10] and it was as such conceived as a fearsome and mysterious gift that allowed the poets to manipulate reality while emphasizing the importance of communal memory. The corpus of pre-Qurʾanic Arabian poems – especially those of the so-called "itinerant poets" (*ṣaʿālīk*) who write about loneliness and poverty – have a nostalgic and melancholic tone, which is typical of love poetry. The material has also a profound socio-political function, aimed at praising rulers and protectors while extolling the glory of the tribe. While explicitly religious language is not heavily attested in the works ascribed to pre-Qurʾanic poets, references to God and to religious beliefs and practices are by no means absent from this corpus. Thus, glimpses of the religious life of the inhabitants of Arabia in the years before Muḥammad are quite frequently found in pre-Islamic poetry, albeit often mentioned only in passing. The word Allāh occurs very frequently in poems attributed to pre-Islamic times, surpassing the mention of the names of any of the idols the Arabs are said to have worshipped before Muḥammad. Moreover, many of the Qurʾān's statements about the beliefs of its opponents find confirmation in pre-Qurʾanic poetry.[11]

Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and epigraphy comprise the only surviving inside testimony to the religious and cultural life of Arabia before Islam. However, unlike pre-Islamic epigraphy, which has attracted increasing scholarly interest in recent decades, the poetic corpus of pre-Islamic Arabia remains largely neglected, mainly due to doubts concerning its authenticity. With both Muslim-era poetry collectors and modern scholars questioning the historicity of some, or in some cases all, poetry[12] said to have stemmed from pre-Islamic Arabia, this poetry, with all its potential to shed light on a significant period in the history of Arabia, had to take the back seat in research into the Qurʾanic milieu. As Peter Webb mentions in his article in this collection, one of the issues modern scholars have with the corpus of pre-Qurʾanic poetry is its oral transmission – the fact that it was probably only recorded after two to three centuries of being transmitted orally. Webb, however, argues persuasively that much of this poetry existed in written form in special collections well before the time it is believed to have been

10 Grasso 2023b: 160–88.

11 Sinai 2019.

12 One of the loudest voices of the 20th century dismissing all poetry attributed to pre-Islam as false Muslim inventions was Ṭāha Ḥusayn (1889–1973) in his influential book *fī sh-shiʿri l-Jāhilī* (1926), later republished under the title *fī l-adab l-jāhilī* (1933).

ultimately recorded, i. e., the third/ninth century. Thus, even if we do accept that pre-Islamic poetry was written down after a long period of oral transmission, many problems regarding the authenticity of this corpus become negligible.[13]

Given the situation described above, it is not surprising that studies dealing with religious notions in pre-Islamic poetry are rare. Nevertheless, there have been some scholarly efforts in recent years to include extant pre-Islamic poetry in the study of the Qurʾān's background and in investigations of the possible continuities and ruptures of religious beliefs and practices before and after Muḥammad, a long overdue corrective to the dismissive approach. Two important studies that survey religious trends across the entire corpus are Sinai's work on Allāh in pre-Qurʾanic poetry cited above and Webb's work in this collection, which attempts to reconstruct pre-Islamic *ḥajj* based on poetical evidence. Webb takes additional care to include only those verses in his survey that appear in early specialist poetry collections, a source that, he argues, is devoid of political agendas and, therefore, more likely to contain genuine voices from the period he examines in his article. Thus, Webb's study, in conjunction with investigations of what pre-Islamic epigraphy has to say about *ḥajj*, brought here by Suleyman Dost's paper, offers the most complete reconstruction of this Arabian rite that we have so far.

2 The Articles

The contributions gathered in this collection deal, on the one hand, with various aspects of social, religious, and intellectual life in pre-Islamic Arabia, as reflected mainly in inscriptions, and, on the other, with their Islamic counterparts, as reflected in the Qur'ān. The authors' examination of the continuity between the centuries before Muḥammad began his career in Mecca and the new realities his teachings brought forth is vital for any close analysis of the Qurʾān's message. The five papers tackle this task as follows: Suleyman Dost's comparison of the main features of the pilgrimage rituals in the Qurʾān with similar earlier Arabian rituals attested in epigraphic inscriptions demonstrates how helpful epigraphic sources are in learning about the context in which Islam emerged and how existing Arabian practice shaped the teachings of the new religion. Dost examines both the similarities and the discrepancies between the Qurʾān's *ḥajj* and the pilgrimage to the temple of Awām in Ma'rib depicted in inscriptions, concluding that while the pre-Islamic practice appears to be highly comparable to the Qurʾanic *ḥajj*, the Qurʾān made a "conscious effort" to cleanse the Muslim rite of some elements of pre-Islamic Arabian practice, i. e. the rituals of hunting during the pilgrimage season and animal sacrifice performed on stone altars. Pilgrimage is also the focus of Peter Webb's contribution, in which he undertakes the task of reconstructing the *ḥajj* before Muḥammad based on the evidence found in pre- Qurʾanic Arabian poetry and

13 Grasso 2023a: 20 – 21.

in early *ḥadīth* collections. Webb's survey of the most reliable textual sources available from the first centuries of Islam lead to a clear conclusion: a sacred pilgrimage to Mecca did exist before Islam. Not only that but the commonalities and divergences between the pre-Islamic and the Islamic pilgrimages which Webb points out in his paper dovetail neatly with Dost's results and the epigraphical and the literary evidence strongly reinforce each other.

In her paper on slavery in first-millennium Arabia, Valentina A. Grasso traces references to human subordination in Arabian inscriptions and compares the status of enslaved people and the practices around them with the Qurʾanic stance toward slavery. Grasso demonstrates that similar to their status as family members suggested in the Qurʻān, enslaved people in South Arabian inscriptions were considered part of their masters' households. Furthermore, Grasso argues that the existence of inscriptions written by freedmen strongly suggests that, contrary to what some believe, the manumission of enslaved people was not necessarily an innovation of Islam.

In her article, Maria Gorea sheds light on the historical background of the Aramaic word raḥmānāʾ, and how it has made its way into Arabic and the Qurʾān as the divine epithet al-raḥmān. She surveys the attestations of the related Semitic roots rḥm and rḫm in Akkadian, Aramaic, Hebrew, and South Arabian inscriptions from different periods, examining the various incarnations of these roots and their derivatives, which signify "love" and "mercy". Marijn van Putten's study focuses instead on specific orthographic features of the Qurʾanic text and their relation to the orthography of pre-and early Islamic inscriptions. While some of the developments have thus far been attested only in the Islamic period, epigraphic discoveries have revealed that at least three of the seven developments Van Putten discusses in his paper were already underway well before the Qurʾān. All in all, the papers assembled here show that Islam constituted neither a rupture nor an alien product in the region." The epigraphic and textual sources examined by all contributors confirm that the Qurʾān, despite its reformational tone, is very much in harmony with its Arabian context.

3 The Relevance of the Sources and Findings of the Articles for the Study of the Qurʾān

The articles in this collection all manage to combine the evidence of four corpora that have too often been studied separately: pre-Islamic Arabian epigraphy, pre-Islamic poetry, the Qurʾān, and classical Islamic sources. Some scholars of Qurʾanic Studies have pointed out that the Qurʾān is a text without a context since no earlier or contemporary Arabic literary text exists prior to the rise of Islam.[14] The only available literary sources from which one can learn about the pre-Qurʾanic and Qurʾanic ideas and motifs are the aforementioned pre-Islamic Arabian poetry and early Muslim sources. Early Mus-

14 Peters 1991: 300.

lim sources pertinent to the study of the Qurʾān include the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, hadith collections, and a book by Muslim authors on depictions of gods and rites of pre-Islamic Arab religions. For over a century, scholars have largely used these literary sources for the study of the Qurʾān and its milieu. Pre-Islamic poetry, however, has remained understudied partly due to the complex nature and difficult structure of those poems. Yet studying and comparing pre-Islamic Arabian poetry and the hadith with the Qurʾān has also raised doubts among scholars: does post-Qurʾanic hadith contribute to the scholarly understanding of the Qurʾān or is the hadith a projection of later Muslim communities from a different context and a different period of time? Does the biography of the Prophet contain reliable historical information on the emergence of Islam or is the biography a hagiographic work, including stories on the life of the Prophet fabricated for the theological purposes of the later Muslims? As mentioned above, some scholars proposed that poetry was a forgery of later generations. These accusations may be partially justified, as some poems indeed sporadically quote Qurʾanic phrases.[15] These insertions also beg the question of how one can differentiate original pre-Islamic motifs and concepts from later Islamic additions. These methodological issues led some scholars of Qurʾanic Studies to reject pre-Islamic Arabian poetry, the hadith, and the biography of Muḥammad entirely and look for other more reliable sources to comment on pre-Islamic Arabia.

In the last decades, a series of excavations have led to a much better understanding of pre-Islamic ways of life, their gods, and rites, as described in detail above. At the same time, scholars of Qurʾanic Studies have collectively agreed to employ epigraphic findings to facilitate the reconstruction of the Qurʾanic milieu and of the beliefs circulating at the dawn of Islam. The articles published in this collection combine these trends and take them to the next level by approaching the Qurʾanic milieu from various angles: via most recent epigraphic findings, via comparison of Qurʾanic manuscripts with epigraphic findings to reveal a bigger picture of Arabian literacy, and finally, through the lens of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry and the hadith.

The articles substantially shape ongoing discussions on the Qurʾanic milieu and divergent themes and motifs. Suleyman Dost and Peter Webb jointly analyze pre-Islamic *ḥajj* in epigraphic inscriptions as well as in pre-Islamic Arabian poetry and the hadith. Suleyman Dost explores *ḥajj* via inscriptions, showing that the pilgrimage to the Kaʿba in the Qurʾān must be seen and understood via its Arabian context. Dost suggests that comparable festivals were practiced on the Arabian Peninsula prior to the rise of Islam. Thereby, Dost's arguments are consistent with the previous scholarship on *ḥajj*, particularly, the recent studies by Holger Zellentin and Nicolai Sinai.[16] Webb's findings also confirm Dost's conclusions that *ḥajj* is Arabian and that an analogous ritual was performed by the Quraysh in the sixth century. According to Webb, similar practices of the pilgrimage were widespread on the Arabian Peninsula, either in

15 See for instance Toral-Niehoff 2008: 238.

16 Sinai 2023; Zellentin 2022: 120–21, 308–9, 311–14, 337.

sixth-century Mecca or outside the Hijaz. Another very important finding of Webb's study is that pre-Islamic Arabian poets do not relate the Kaʿba and *ḥajj* to Abraham and Ishmael in contrast to what is suggested in Q 2:125–129 and 22:26 and the hadith. This has consequences for forging better understandings of the overall Qurʾanic message: as the Qurʾān places the Arabs and Muslims as successors of Jews and Christians and presents itself as confirming the Torah and the Gospels (e. g., Q 3:3; 5:46–48), it endorses the common origin through Abraham and connects the Kaʿba to Abraham and Ishmael, regarded to be the forefather of the Arabs. The endorsement is something pre-Islamic Arabian poets, understandably, do not emphasize. Finally, more broadly, these two papers mean that the pilgrimage to the Kaʿba in the Qurʾān is now better explored within the field of Qurʾanic Studies.

Valentina Grasso shows that the terms –*ʿbd*, *ʾmt*, *ḥr*(*r*), *fty*, and *ġlm* – are used in Ancient Arabian inscriptions to denote "people in subordinate positions." All of these terms are also mentioned in the Qurʾān. By contrast, phrases such as *mā malakat aymanu-* (e. g., Q 4:3, 24:31) and *ʿabd mamlūk* (Q 16:75) for slaves seem to appear only in the Qurʾān, both phrases linked to possession as expressed by the root *m-l-k*. Notably, both terms occur differently: whereas the Qurʾān employs *ʿabd mamlūk* for the sake of comparison, it simultaneously puts forward rules for slaves, relating them as *mā malakat aymanu-*. As the references by Grasso make clear, the Qurʾān is conscious of slavery in the Meccan period, but the holy book of Muslims incorporates its own take on slavery only in the Medinan period of revelation. Grasso demonstrates that there is a continuity between the Qurʾanic and Ancient Arabian practices of the treatment of enslaved people. While it is sometimes difficult to define whether a subordinate person is an enslaved person or a servant in these inscriptions, there are still obvious similarities between the use of these terms in the Qurʾān and Ancient Arabian epigraphy. Similarities include: the notion of the Ancient Arabian *ʿbd* meaning a person subordinated to a deity, a servant, or an enslaved person is comparable with the Qurʾanic usage of *ʿabd* as a subordinated person to God or an enslaved person referring to his or her social status in e. g., Q 2:23 (Muḥammad as a person subordinated to God) and 2:178, 221 (an enslaved person). *ʾmt* (enslaved woman or servant) reappears as *amah* (enslaved woman) in Q 2:221 and 24:32 as well. *Ḥurr* (free person), a cognate of *ḥr*(*r*), recurs once in Q 2:178. One can explain this single occurrence of free persons by the concern of the Qurʾān with enslaved people and the Qurʾān's effort to clarify rules for their behavior. In contrast, the Qurʾān always speaks only to the free person about the enslaved people and the rules regulating their behavior (e. g., Q 4:3, 24–25, 36). As Karen Bauer and Feras Hamza in their forthcoming book *Patronage as Piety: Women, Households and the Hereafter in the Qurʾān* show, the Qurʾān as a whole seems to be addressed mainly to free heads of households. This fact explains both the scarcity of terms explicating the implied addressee (i. e., free males) and the focus on regulating the behavior of all people in subordinate positions, including enslaved people. The Qurʾān also reveals a similarity with the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions regarding *ġlm* (boy or boy in subordinate positions), as it deploys *ġulām* and *ġilmān* to relate to a son (e. g., Q 19:8, 19–20), a boy (e. g., Q 15:53; 18:80), or a servant boy (e. g., Q 52:24). Overall,

Grasso's study perceives the Qurʾanic approach to slavery standing in broad continuity with North and South Arabian customs.

Maria Gorea links one of the most frequent names *al-raḥmān* (the Most Gracious) in the Qurʾān to the Aramaic *raḥmānāʾ* by analyzing inscriptions and Jewish, Greek, and Syriac sources. Whereas the Aramaic *raḥmān* is used for gods as well as kings in the inscriptions, the Qurʾanic *al-raḥmān* with its definite article *al-* solely relates to the one God (e. g., Q 13:30; 17:110; 19:18). Accordingly, the Qurʾanic God is introduced as *arḥam al-rāḥimīna* (the most merciful of all in e. g., Q 7:151; 12:92; 21:83), while all other merciful beings such as prophets and common people seem to be referred to as *rāḥim*. This use of *al-raḥmān* as the divine name of God is likely to reveal a continuity with the Biblical and especially Jewish use of the Merciful, though Gorea leaves the way of transmission – either from Ḥimyar or Palmyra – from Aramaic *raḥmānāʾ* to the Qurʾanic *raḥmān* open to discussion. The divine name *al-raḥmān* in the Qurʾān predominantly appears in passages that underscore God's mercy to humans (e. g., Q 19:61, 85; 55:1 – 2).[17] This means that *al-raḥmān* is logically embedded in the context of the sūrahs while being an inherent part of the Qurʾanic revelation. Still, *al-raḥmān* most prominently – 16 times – occurs in Q Maryam 19, which raises the question of whether *raḥmān* and the general idea of God's mercy should also be connected to Christian notions of the merciful God. In sum, Maria Gorea's study helps scholars of Qurʾanic Studies both appreciate and identify the far-reaching connection of the term *al-raḥmān* to the Aramaic *raḥmānāʾ*.

Most recently, Stephen Shoemaker argued that since literacy did not exist in the Hijaz during the first half of the seventh century CE, the Qurʾān could not have emerged in Mecca and Medina.[18] Shoemaker cited findings of distinguished epigraphists such as Michael Macdonald and Christian Robin to argue that the central Hijaz remained nonliterate in the time of Muḥammad.[19] Thereby, Shoemaker attacked the traditional model of the transmission of the Qurʾān according to which the Qurʾān was primarily transmitted orally before being collected and edited in the reign of the caliph ʿUthmān (12 – 35 AH / 644 – 656 CE). Shoemaker further explained that the oral transmission requires a written text and thus, literacy, as one can only memorize parts of the Qurʾān correctly if he or she can go back to the text and check the right wording. According to Shoemaker, since pre-Islamic Hijazi Arabs were illiterate, they could not have been able to learn long texts and transmit them reliably over the years.[20] To solve the issue of the Qurʾān's emergence in an illiterate society, Shoemaker has suggested that large portions of the Qurʾān emerged in Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia.[21] Marijn van Putten challenges Shoemaker's theory of the illiterate Hijaz and proposes the existence of a formalized and significantly sophisticated scribal practice

17 For an extensive analysis of the Qurʾanic *al-raḥmān* see Sinai 2023.
18 Shoemaker 2022: 121 – 47.
19 Shoemaker 2022: 121, 143.
20 Shoemaker 2022: 149, 155, 168 – 70.
21 Shoemaker 2022: 143.

that existed in the pre-Islamic period. If Van Putten's proposal is correct, the Qurʾān could have been transmitted mostly orally with parts written down as early as the ministry of Muḥammad.

Bibliography

Al-Jallad, Ahmad. *An Outline of the Grammar of the Safaitic Inscriptions.* Leiden: Brill, 2015.

Bauer, Karen and Hamza, Feras. *Patronage as Piety: Women, Households and the Hereafter in the Qurʾan*, forthcoming.

Beeston, Alfred F. *Sabaic Grammar.* Manchester: University of Manchester, 1984.

Grasso, Valentina A. "A Late Antique Kingdom's Conversion: Jews and Sympathizers in South Arabia", *Journal of Late Antiquity* 13 (2020): 352 – 82.

Grasso, Valentina A. *Pre-Islamic Arabia. Societies, Politics, Cults and Identities during Late Antiquity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023a.

Grasso, Valentina A. "Historicizing Ontologies: Qur'ānic Preternatural Creatures between Ancient Topoi and Emerging Traditions." *Journal of Late Antiquity* 16 (2023b): 160 – 88.

Ḥusayn, Ṭāha. *Fī al-adab al-Jāhilī.* Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Farūq, 1933.

Macdonald, Michael. "Reflections on the linguistic map of Pre-Islamic Arabia", *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 11 (2000): 28 – 79.

Macdonald, Michael C. A. "Literacy in an Oral Environment" in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society*, ed. P. Bienkowski, C. B. Mee and E. A. Slater. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Macdonald, Michael C. A. "The Decline of the 'Epigraphic Habit' in Late Antique Arabia: Some Questions", in *L'Arabie à la veille de l'Islam*, ed. C. Robin and J. Schiettecatte, 17 – 27. Paris, 2008a.

Macdonald, Michael C. A. "Old Arabic (Epigraphic)" in K. Versteeg (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, vol. 3, 464 – 77. Leiden: Brill, 2008b.

Macdonald, Michael C. A. "On the uses of writing in ancient Arabia and the role of paleography in Studying them", *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 15 (2015): 1 – 50.

Nehmé, Laila. "A glimpse of the development of the Nabataean script into Arabic based on old and new epigraphic material" in *The Development of Arabic as a Written Language*, ed. Michael C. A. Macdonald, 47 – 88. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010.

Nehmé, Laila. "Aramaic or Arabic? The Nabataeo-Arabic Script and the Language of the Inscriptions Written in This Script" in *Arabic in Context*, ed. A. al-Jallad, 75 – 98. Leiden: Brill, 2017.

Peters, Francis. "The Quest of the Historical Muḥammad", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23/2 (1991), 291 – 315.

Robin, Christian J.; A. I. al-Ghabbān, and F. S. al-Saʿīd. "Inscriptions antiques de la région de Najrān (Arabie Séoudite méridionale): nouveaux jalons pour l'histoire de l'écriture, de la langue et du calendrier Arabe.", *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (2014): 1033 – 128.

Shoemaker, Stephen J. *Creating the Qurʾan. A Historical-Critical Study.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2022.

Sinai, Nicolai. *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler: Allāh in Pre-Quranic Poetry.* New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2019.

Sinai, Nicolai. *Key Terms of the Qurʾan, A Critical Dictionary.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.

Stein, Peter. *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskulinschriften auf Holzstäbchen aus der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in München, vol. 1: Die Inschriften der mittel- und spätsabäischen Periode.* Tübingen: Wasmuth Verlag, 2010.

Toral-Niehoff, Isabel. "Eine poetische Gestaltung des Sündenfalls: Das Mythos in dem vorislamisch-arabischen Schöpfungsgedicht von ʿAdī b. Zaid", in *"Im vollen Licht der Geschichte" – Die*

Wissenschaft des Judentums und der Beginn einer historisch-kritischen Koranforschung, eds. D. Hartwig, W. Homolka, M. J. Marx, A. Neuwirth. Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2008, 235 – 56.
Zellentin, Holger M. *Law Beyond Israel. From the Bible to the Qur'an.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.