What present-day diglossia in Arabic inscriptions can tell us about the linguistic situation in the early Islamic period

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Abstract

This article compares modern and early Islamic Arabic graffiti from the Syro-Arabian Ḥarrah (Black Desert) and the Ḥismà to investigate the relationship between literacy, diglossia, and orthography. Modern inscriptions, written by individuals with rudimentary education in Modern Standard/Classical Arabic, exhibit pervasive grammatical and spelling irregularities, including phonetic spellings and code-switching, which reflect the significant linguistic distance (diglossia) between the written high register and the spoken vernacular. These orthographic irregularities are nearly absent in early Islamic graffiti from the Ḥismà, where deviations from Classical Arabic are instead systematic and rule-bound. This situation is the result of "orthographic depth", indicating that the early Arabic script was standardized within a scribal educational context, not a near-phonetic environment like Safaitic, and suggests a shallower diglossic gap or a higher degree of scribal regulation in the early Islamic period.

Keywords

Arabic Diglossia; Epigraphy; Orthography; Arabic Graffiti; Early Islam

1. Introduction

The Syro-Arabian *ḥarrah*, the so-called Black Desert, is home to tens of thousands of inscriptions, both ancient and modern (Map 1). The epigraphic record of the region probably extends back to the mid or early first millennium BCE, represented by inscriptions in the so-called Thamudic B script.[1] But by far the largest category of inscriptions is Safaitic, a South Semitic script used to carve informal texts around the turn of the era. While the exact chronological boundaries of the script are unclear, there are good arguments to make for it coming into form by the 3rd century BCE and continuing until the 4th century CE.[2] Its users, however, seem to have been especially productive around the turn of the era, a period to which the majority of our dated inscriptions refer. The known Safaitic corpus presently exceeds some 45,000 specimens, and probably twice this number have been documented but remain unpublished. Unknown tens of thousands remain undiscovered in the vast basalt desert of southern Syria, where warfare and political instability have rendered fieldwork impossible.[3] These huge

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1 - The number of Thamudic B inscriptions from the Ḥarrah is relatively small compared to the core area in northwest Arabia. For the latest assessment of this corpus, see Norris 2018. See Al-Jallad and al-Manaser 2015 on Thamudic B in the Ḥarrah.

2 - See Al-Jallad, forthcoming.

3 - OCIANA (consulted Nov. 6, 2025) presently holds

Image 1: A modern Bedouin encampment in the northeastern Jordanian Ḥarrah (Photo: Ahmad Al-Jallad)

quantities suggested to M.C.A. Macdonald that literacy was rather widespread among the nomads of this period, and unlike settled areas, that these inscriptions were written by their nominal authors rather than being commissioned. In other words, they were personal compositions, *graffiti*. Safaitic script and orthography moreover do not betray the intervention of any formal education. Spellings were, more or less, phonetic.

11379 Safaitic inscriptions from Syria, roughly a quarter of the corpus. However, more than half of these texts are known only from hand copies, oftentimes produced by those who did not know the script (see Ryckmans 1950 and Littmann 1943).

Safaitic had a very shallow orthographic depth, as there are no examples of etymological or morphological spellings. Word boundaries were also rarely observed; users wrote their messages as an uninterrupted string of sounds. According to Macdonald, the script was passed along informally from user to user and words were written consonantally as they were pronounced (Macdonald 2005).

Sometime before the rise of Islam, Safaitic disappeared under mysterious circumstances. But the epigraphic record continues, albeit with less intensity. A number of Paleo-Arabic inscriptions are known from the Ḥarrah, but these can be counted so far on one's digits (Alhatlani and al-Manaser 2025). Even early Islamic inscriptions

Image 2: Bedouin flocks pasturing in a wādī where numbers of modern and ancient inscriptions were found (Photo: Ahmad Al-Jallad)

are relatively rare (Alhatlani and al-Manaser 2022). Carvings from the Mamluk period are also known but nothing even approaches the numbers found in Safaitic (Imbert 1998). Cumulatively, this could suggest a recession of literacy among the local population. As the native writing tradition was lost, schooling was required to acquire the scripts of the settled people. There was little motivation to do this, especially on a mass scale, and so the number of texts is predictably smaller. However, with the introduction of public schooling in the 1960s, writing was re-introduced *en masse* to the local inhabitants of the Ḥarrah (Image 1, 2), and they took to carving copious amounts of texts (Image 3), just as the inhabitants of this place did twenty centuries ago (Al-Manaser and Macdonald 2024). Since the modern inscriptions have not enjoyed the attention of professional epigraphists, the corpus size is unknown. But from my own personal experience in the Ḥarrah, which now spans a decade, I can confidently say that it is the largest corpus of texts after Safaitic. One often finds these modern texts carved on the same cairns and on the same rocks as ancient inscriptions (Image 4).

Image 3: An arrangement of modern Arabic inscriptions from the northeastern Jordanian Ḥarrah (Photograph: Ahmad Al-Jallad)
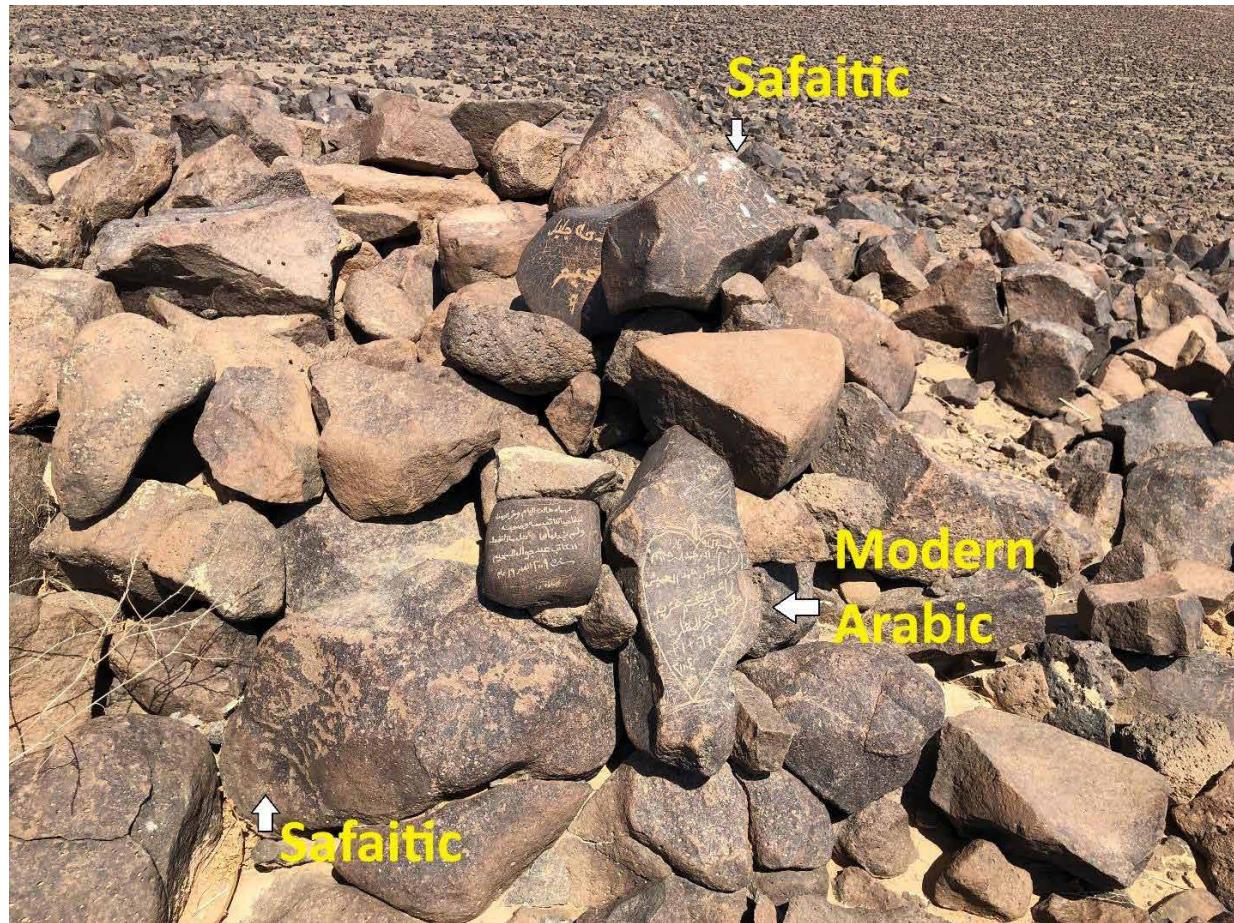
Image 4: A cairn bearing Safaitic and modern Arabic inscriptions (Photograph: Ahmad Al-Jallad)

The modern Arabic situation differs in another crucial way from Safaitic. The Bedouin did not learn to write in their spoken language, which is in fact an unwritten variety of Arabic, but rather were taught in the provincial schools the grammar rules and orthography of the the high-register, what is called in western literature Modern Standard Arabic and known in Arabic as *al-luġatu l-ʿarabiyyatu l-fuṣḥà*, 'the purest Arabic language.' Modern Arabic is characterized by diglossia, meaning the written language (the form a Bedouin would learn in school) is markedly different, grammatically and lexically, from the spoken one.[4] In addition to this, unlike

Safaitic, Arabic spelling is characterized by considerable orthographic depth, meaning that one does not simply write phonetically what one pronounces or hears. Rather, the writing system encodes historical/etymological spellings and morphological information, all of which require deliberate instruction to master (Van Putten 2023).

While for the first time in history, the Bedouin were able to attend schools in large numbers, it was not common until recently to study beyond the first few years of elementary education. Young boys were meant to help their families herd animals and engage in other tasks to bring in money. Thus, the grasp of the grammar and orthographic rules of the high register remained

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4 - This term was introduced by Ferguson 1959. For a brief overview of the Arabic situation, see Ryding 1991, Kaye 2001, and Horn 2015, among many others.

Image 5: BES19_MAr_1 (Photograph: Ahmad Al-Jallad)

rudimentary among the majority. This is borne out in the modern inscriptions left by Bedouin herders. While the penmanship of these compositions is sometimes quite impressive, especially considering the difficult medium onto which they were carved, vernacularisms and hypercorrections populate these texts, in addition to aural spellings, especially of high-register specific words and constructions. These deviations are the hallmark of a diglossic linguistic situation, and also underscore the education requirements needed to produce well-formed Arabic texts. Learning the script alone is simply not enough. Let us investigate a few examples.

2. Diglossia and Orthography in the Modern Arabic inscriptions from the Jordanian Ḥarrah

The following inscription, BES19_MAr_1, was documented during the 2019 Badia Epigraphic Survey campaign in the Jordanian *ḥarrah* by the present author.[5] The text begins with the Islamic opening invocation, *bismi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm* 'in the name of God, the merciful, the kind.' It is then followed by an invocation for the satisfaction of God and his parents, a signature, a double-dating formula, and a protective prayer to preserve the inscription. While these are all elements that repeat across the centuries in Islamic-Arabic inscriptions, the production here is characterized by several colloquialisms and irregular spellings when compared to the target register. The irregularities are given in bold and will be discussed below.

Reading and Translation

1) *bsm ʾllh ʾl-rḥmn ʾl-rḥym*
'In the name of God, the merciful, the kind'
2) *yʾrb rḍʾ-k w-rḍʾ ʾl-wʾldyn ʾn ʾ ʿbd-k*
'O Lord, may you be satisfied and may the parents be satisfied; I am your slave'

3) *yʾ rb ʾl-ʿllmyn yʾrḥm ʾrʾḥmyn*
O lord of the universe; O most merciful of the merciful
4) *ṣʾḥb hẓh ʾl-ḫṭ ʿwdh ʾbn zʾynyn*
'the owner of this writing is ʿōdah son of Zʿēnīn'
5) *ʾl-ḫṭʾb mn **šryt** ʾl-msʾʿyd*
'al-Ḥaṭṭāb from the Masāʿīd tribe'
6) ***tryḫ*** 1997 *mwʾlyd* 77
'Date 1997, (of) those born in '77
7) *ʾl-ḫṭ wrʾt ʾllh ʾn ʾl-ḫrʾb w-l-ḫṭ-h*
'This writing, may God protect it from ruin and for the one who wrote it'

The composition displays several examples of code-switching, but also reveals that the author's ability to grammatically parse phrases from the high register are limited. In line two, the writer spells the stock liturgical phrase 'O most merciful of the merciful', *yā ʾarḥama-r-rāḥimīn* phonetically rather than according to established orthographic practices, resulting in the assimilated spelling of the definite article. Compare the inscription's *yʾrḥm ʾrʾḥmyn*, where only the *a* vowel before the second *r* is reflected graphically versus the same phrase according to Classical Arabic orthography, *yʾ ʾrḥm ʾl-rʾḥmyn*. The initial vocative *y* is also spelled defectively, probably suggesting that he was interpreting it as a short, unstressed vowel, as it is realized in quick speech.[6] In line 4, the author spells the low-register, velarized demonstrative *hāẓa* in a *plene* manner.[7] The author represented the final /a/ vowel using the letter *h*, likely due to the influence of the spelling convention used for the *tāʾ marbūṭah* (ة). In line 5, the author spells the construct form of the word for tribe, *ʿašīrat*, phonetically with a final *t*, *šyrt*, rather than according to established orthographic norms that employ the double-dotted *h* glyph ة (*tāʾ marbūṭah*).[8]

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5 - See Al-Jallad 2020a and Al-Jallad and al-Manaser 2021 for further published discoveries from this season.

6 - The vocative is usually spelled as a prefixed *y-* in the Quran, but it is unlikely that the author is aware of this archaism.
7 - This form is common in modern southern Levantine Arabic (Herin and Al-Wer: 179-180).
8 - Again, this orthographic mistake results coincidentally in a Quranic archaism; see Van Putten 2019.
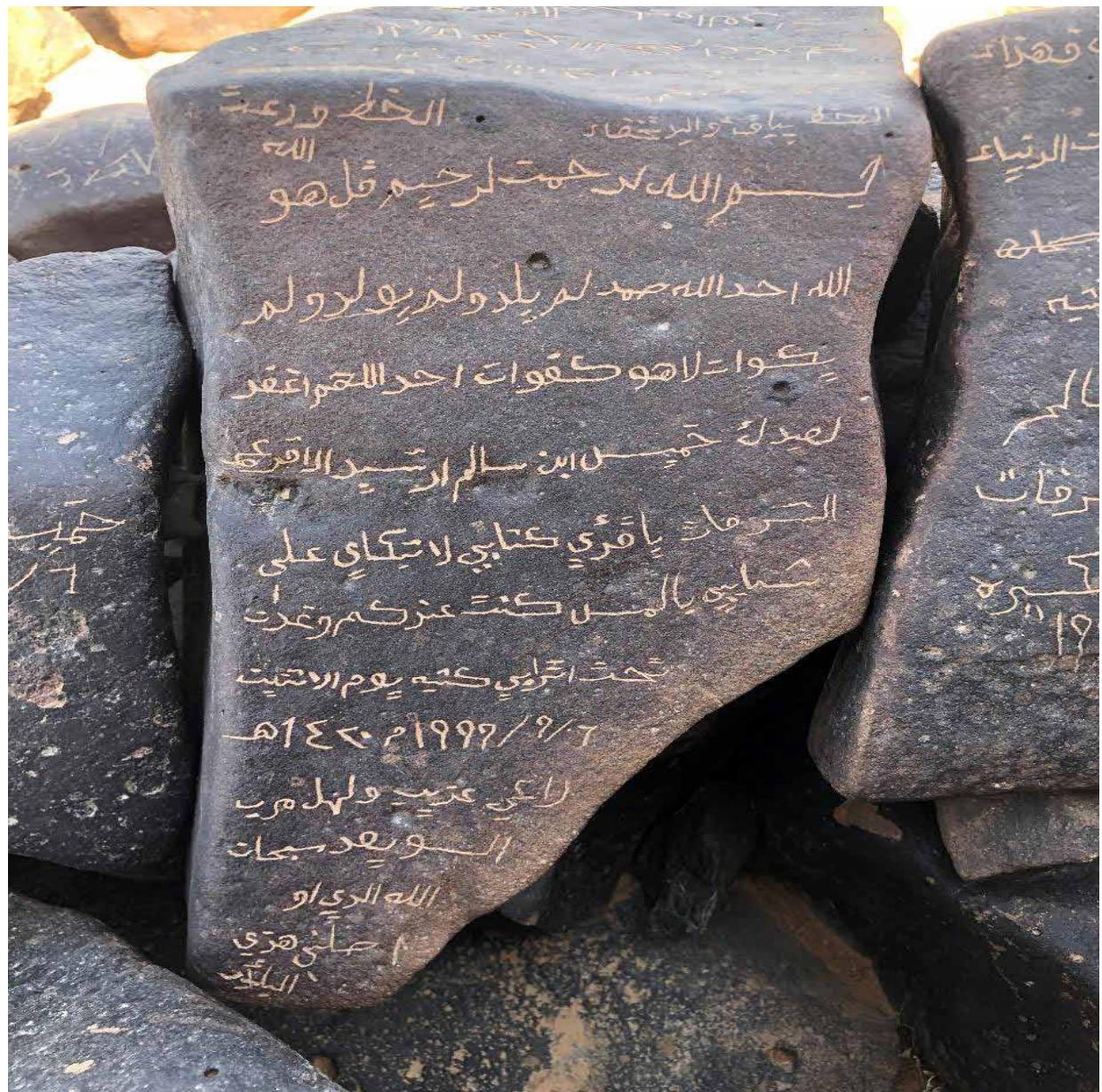
Image 6: BES19_MAr_1 (Photograph: Ahmad Al-Jallad)

The knowledge of the script but not of its orthography or the grammar of the written language manifests in an even more interesting way once we examine pious statements and quotations from the Quran, both of which reflect rote memorized language in the high register. The following inscription, BES19_MAr_2, was discovered during the same mission and in the same area. It reproduces Quran 112 from memory, followed by a few pious statements and a date.

Reading and Translation

1) bsm ʾllh lrḥmn lrḥym ql hw

'in the name of God, the merciful the kind. Say! He is'

2) ʾllh ʾḥd ṣmd lm yld w-lm ywld w lm

'God, one, indivisible, he does not sire nor was he sired and'

3) ykwʾn lʾhw kfwʾn ʾḥd ʾllhm ġfr

'nobody is to him an equal; O God, pardon'

4) l-ʿbd-k ḫmys ʾbn sʾlm ʾršyd ʾl-ʾqrʿ

your slave, Ḥmēs son of Sālim ʾIršēd al-ʾAqraʿ

5) ʾl-šrfʾt yʾ qʾr(ʾ)y ktʾby lʾ tbkʾy ʾly

'(of) the Šurafāt; O reader of this writing of mine do not weep over'

6) šbʾby bʾlms knt ʿnd-km w-ġdn

'my youth; yesterday I was with you and tomorrow'

7) tḥt ʾtrʾby ktb ywm ʾl-ʾtnyn

under my soil; it was written on Monday

8) *6/9/1999m 1420h*

6/9/1999 AD 1420 AH

9) rʾʿy ʾzyb w-l-hl-mrb

'an distant shepherd and for the people of Marabb

10)   ʾl-swyʿd sbḥʾn

'al-Swēʿid; glory be to'

11)   ʾllh ʾlḏy ʾw

'God, who caused

12)   ṣl-ny hḏy ʾl-blʾd

me to reach to these lands'

This inscription's author has committed Q 112 to memory, albeit imperfectly. When he turned to engrave it on rock, he carved it phonetically as he had memorized it, unable to parse it into grammatical units. The definite article when assimilated is not noted at all: *allāhu ʾaḥadu*

llāhu ṣ-ṣamad is written *ʾllh ʾḥd ṣmd*, omitting both the second Allāh and leaving the definite article of *ṣ-ṣamad* unrepresented graphically, in contrast to the Classical spelling *ʾl-ṣmd*. Verse 4 is particularly informative. In the Cairo Edition, the verse appears as in (a) while our author renders it as in (b):

a) *wlm ykn lh kfwʾ ʾḥd*

b) *wlm ykwʾn lʾ hw kfwʾn ʾḥd*

The divergences in spelling occur in grammatical forms that do not exist in the vernacular. The phrase *la-hu* <lh> 'for him' is not realized as such in the colloquial Arabic of the region. Instead, one hears *ilo*, rendering Quranic *la-hu(ū)* unparseable without the intervention of education. As such, our author seems to have analyzed it as two separate words and spelled them with long vowels, <lʾ> = *la* the dative and <hw> = *hu* the 3rd person suffixed pronoun. Classical Arabic consonantal orthography does not render the final *-n* of the absolute state of nouns and of adverbs graphically (the so-called *tanwīn*). To apply this orthography correctly, one must be able to determine the morphological category of the final *n*, a task which is rendered more difficult by the fact that modern Jordanian Arabic does not employ *tanwīn*, except on loans from Classical Arabic. Our writer consistently spells the *n*'s of this category with the consonantal *n*. The spelling of the verb *yakun* as *ykwʾn* would appear to be contamination from the following *kfwʾn* rather than being somehow phonetically anchored. This *plene* spelling of *tanwīn* continues beyond the Quranic quotation. In line 6, he spells the adverb *ġadan* predictably as *ġdn* rather than with the Classical Arabic spelling *ġdʾ*. The divergent Quranic spellings are easily explained once we turn our attention to the rest of the composition. The writer seems to have a very poor grasp of the high register and Arabic orthography in general, having only learned the rudimentary elements of the Arabic script, the phoneme-glyph values and cursive conventions, at school. The rest of the text is mostly composed in the low-register, as evidenced by the negative precative phrase in line 5: *lʾ tbkʾy* 'do not cry.' This probably reflects the dialectal *lā tabkáy* rather than Classical Arabic *lā tabki*, spelled *lʾ tbk*. Line 7 *ʾtrby* renders
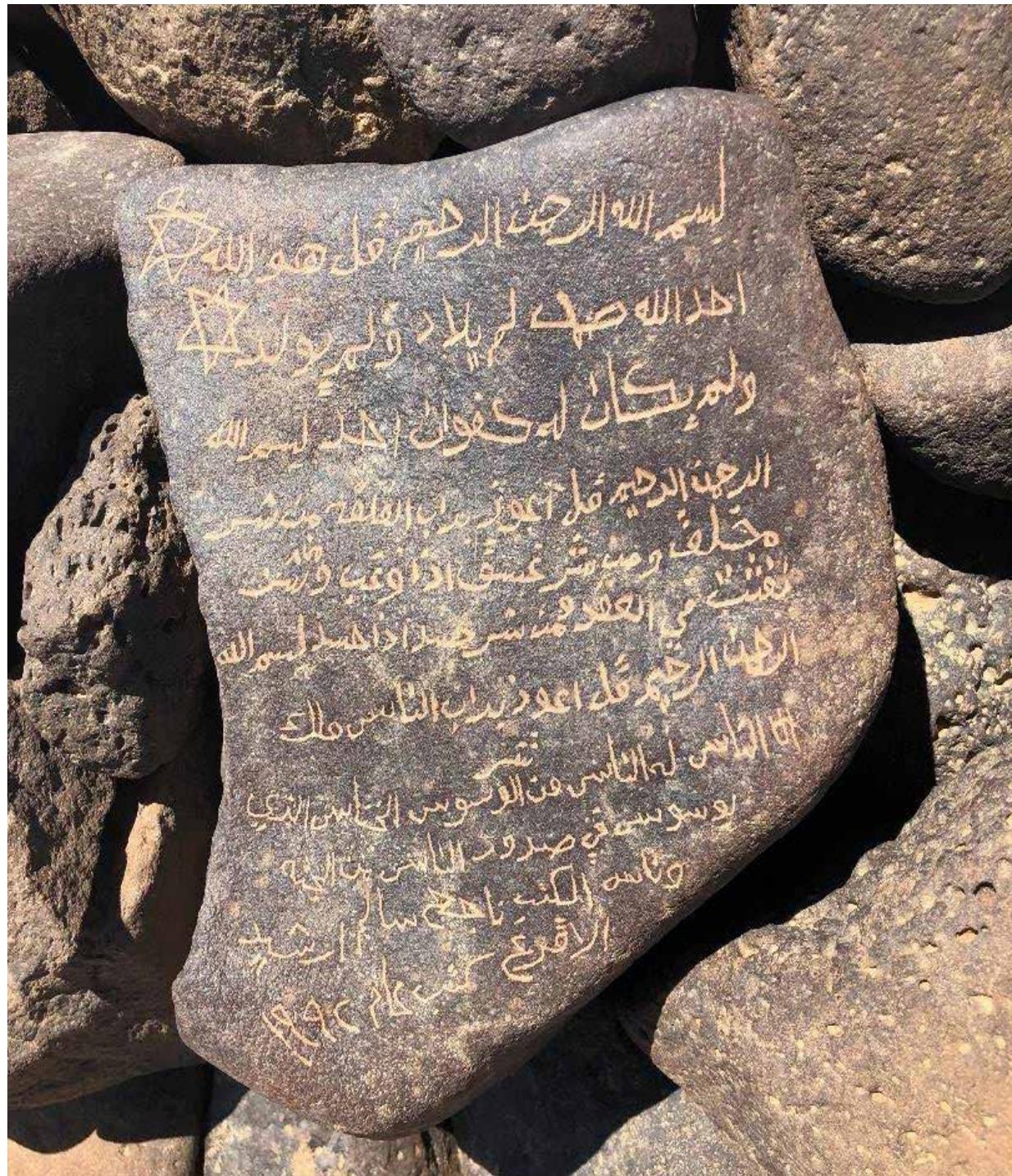
Image 7: BES19_MAr_3 (Photograph: Ahmad Al-Jallad)

the low-register pronunciation of 'my dirt' with vowel syncope and prothesis, *itrābī*, rather than the high-register form, *turābī*, which would not be spelled with an initial *alif*. Line 12 supplies us again with a colloquial feminine singular demonstrative *hādī*, written *hḏy*, rather than Classical Arabic *hāḏihī* <hḏh>.[9] Nevertheless, our writer codeswitches to the high register in between lines 11 and 12 where he praises God, who caused him to reach these lands. He uses the Classical Arabic demonstrative *ʾlḏy* rather than the low register *ʾl(l)y* and the C-stem verb *ʾwṣl* /ʾawṣala/ contrasts with the low-register D-stem *waṣṣal*.

The following stone, BES19_MAr_3, holds Quranic *surahs* 112-114, which are among the first chapters Muslim children commit to memory. The present author has somewhat of a better grasp of Arabic orthography and appears more capable of parsing Quranic Arabic, but still not perfectly.

1) bsm ʾllh ʾlrḥmn ʾlrḥym ql hw ʾllh
'In the name of God, the merciful, the kind; say! He, God, is

2) ḥd ʾllh ṣmd lm ylʾd w-lm ywld
One. God is indivisible; he does not sire nor was he sired

3) w-lm ykʾn l-h kfwʾn ḥd bsm ʾllh
and nothing is an equal to him; in the name of God

4) ʾlrḥmn ʾlrḥym ql ʾʿwḏ b-rʾb ʾl-flq mn šr
The merciful, the kind; say! I seek refuge in the lord of dawn from the evil

5) mḫlq w-mn šr ǧsq ʾḏ wqb w-šr
of what he created; and from the evil of the night when it falls; and the evil

6) nftṯ fy ʾl-ʿqd w-mn šr ḥsd ʾḏ ḥsd bsm ʾllh
of women who blow into knots; and from the evil of the envier when he envies; in the name of God

7) ʾl-rḥmn ʾl-rḥym ql ʾʿwḏ b-rʾb ʾl-nʾs mlk
The merciful, the kind; say! I seek refuge in the lord of

men; king

8) ʾl-nʾs lh ʾl-nʾs mn <<šr>> ʾl-wsws ʾl-ḫnʾs
Of men; god of men; from the evil of the hidden whisperer

9) ʾlḏy ywsws fy ṣdwr ʾl-nʾs mn ʾl-ǧnh
Who whispers into the hearts of men, be he of the Ǧinn

10) w-nʾs ʾl-ktb nʾǧḥ sʾlm ʾršyd
or of men; the writer, Nāǧiḥ Sālim ʾIršēd

11) ʾl-ʾqrʿ ktb ʿm 1992
Al-ʾAqraʿ, wrote the year 1992'

Like the author of BES19_MAr_2, the author shows some hesitation with the morphological spelling of the definite article, often times writing the assimilated forms in a *plene* manner: *ṣ-ṣamad* as <ṣmd> (line 2); *n-naffāṯāt* <nftṯ> (line 6); *wa-n-nās* <w-nʾs> (line 10). Constructions that are grammatically alien to modern Arabic also display erratic, hypercorrect orthographic attempts: *lam yalid* 'he does not sire' is spelled curiously with an *alif* in penultimate position, <lm ylʾd>, and the same happens with *lam yakun* 'there is not', rendered as <lm ykʾn>. This could perhaps stem from the overapplication of the "silent" alif rule of the adverbial/unbound accusative ending *an* spelled ʾ in Classical orthography. The indefinite relative pronoun *mā* has disappeared in the modern vernacular and as such the phrase *min šarri mā ḫalaq* 'from the evil of whatever he has created' was no longer parsable, and so our author wrote the final two words as one, *mḫlq* (line 5).

The same may explain the spelling of the word for 'god' *ʾilāh* as *lh* in line 8. In the recitation of the *surah*, this phrase would be pronounced *qul ʾaʿūḏū bi-rabbi n-nās maliki n-nās ʾilāhi n-nās* 'say: I see refuge in the lord of men, the king of men, the god of men.' The absence of the glottal stop in the colloquial would have caused the segment …*n-nās ʾilāhi n-nās* to be pronounced as *n-nās ilāhi n-nās*. While many of the words in this *sūrah* terminate in the *i* vowel of the genitive, the case system has collapsed in the modern vernacular and the function of these final vowels can only be known through deliberate education. The author recognized that the final *i* vowels are not expressed orthographically and so misparses *n-nās ilāhi n-nās* as *n-nāsi lāhi n-nās*, and as such spelled the word for 'god' as *lh* rather than *ʾlh*.

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9 - While the form *hādī* is attested in ancient Arabic poetry and even in some Quranic reading traditions, it would be too much to assume that the present author was drawing on such scholarly arcana to produce his inscription. It is, rather, best to consider this a modern colloquialism.

There is also a hesitation regarding the spelling of internal ā, which goes unexpressed on several occasions, *ġāsiq* <ġsq>. This uncertainty sometimes accidentally produces archaic and orthographically correct, from the perspective of the Quran, forms. For example, <nftt> 'blowers' in line 6 is spelled without any representation of the internal long ā vowels with the *alif* ʾ, *naffāṭāt*. This matches Quranic orthography against Classical Arabic norms, which demand <nfʿṭʾt>. Given that our author omitted the graphic representation of the definite article on this noun, suggesting that he was writing, more or less, as he heard things, it is unlikely that he was aware of the archaic codical Quranic spelling. Rather, his spelling 'mistake' resulted coincidentally in an archaic form.

3. What does the present tell us about the past?

The preceding section does not attempt a comprehensive overview of the inscriptional register of the modern Arabic inscriptions, although such a project is an important desideratum. Rather, I wish only to highlight the kinds of problems that arise when writing Arabic in a diglossic situation with mastery only of the letter shapes. This real-time, observable situation underscores Van Putten's (2023) arguments about the orthographic depth of ancient Ḥiǧāzī Arabic orthography. They prove that orthographic conventions of Arabic are not intuitive, as they are anchored in historical linguistic developments and morphological knowledge. Consequently, correct spelling necessitates formal instruction within an educational curriculum, rather than mere familiarity with the alphabet. While the mixing of linguistic registers is unsurprising, the rudimentary education provided to the Bedouin reveals something else – without focused and deliberate instruction, the spelling of Arabic becomes highly erratic, as users haphazardly fluctuate between poorly absorbed orthographic conventions and phonetic spellings. This suggests the Quran was written down in a mature, scribally regulated environment and script, rather than in a non-literate setting like the Safaitic one.[10]

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10 - Pace Shoemaker 2022: 125.
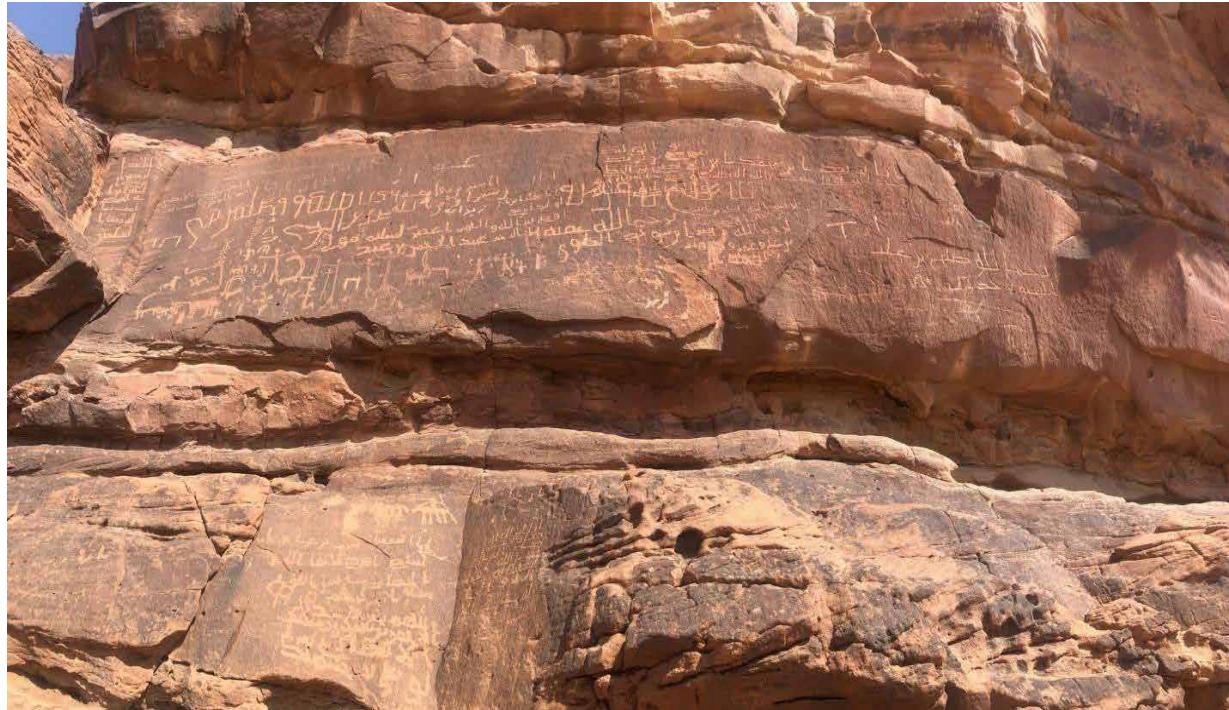
Image 8: A rock face bearing Thamudic, Nabataean, and early Islamic inscriptions in the Ḥismà west of Tabūk (Photograph: Ahmad Al-Jallad)

The corpus of modern Arabic inscriptions provides an important comparandum when attempting to understand the linguistic situation of the early Islamic period as well. They reveal what inscriptions *can* look like when produced by the marginally literate in a diglossic linguistic environment. The deviations from the Classical standard in the modern inscriptions are rendered all the more significant once we compare them to graffiti from the first few Islamic centuries. Let us concern ourselves with the early Islamic graffiti from the Ḥismà Moslem pilgrimage route in northern Saudi Arabia as published in Saʿīd *et al.* (2018). The Ḥismà is one of the richest regions of Arabia in terms of epigraphy. The innumerable sandstone rock faces bear inscriptions that span nearly three millennia, from Thamudic and Aramaic to modern Arabic.

But by far the most abundant pre-modern category is early Islamic inscriptions. There are no reliable numbers as to how many such inscriptions exist in the region, as no comprehensive results of the epigraphic exploration of the region have been published. However, having surveyed for two seasons in the Ḥismà, it is safe to say that we are dealing with tens of thousands of early Islamic graffiti. Some of these texts were clearly carved by individuals with considerable experience, perhaps trained scribes and masons. Others, however, are much humbler and may reflect the works of literate private individuals.

In the corpus collected by al-Saʿīd *et al.* 2018 differs in a significant way from the modern inscriptions discussed above. There are no clear deviations that point towards a vernacular register *significantly* distinct from the
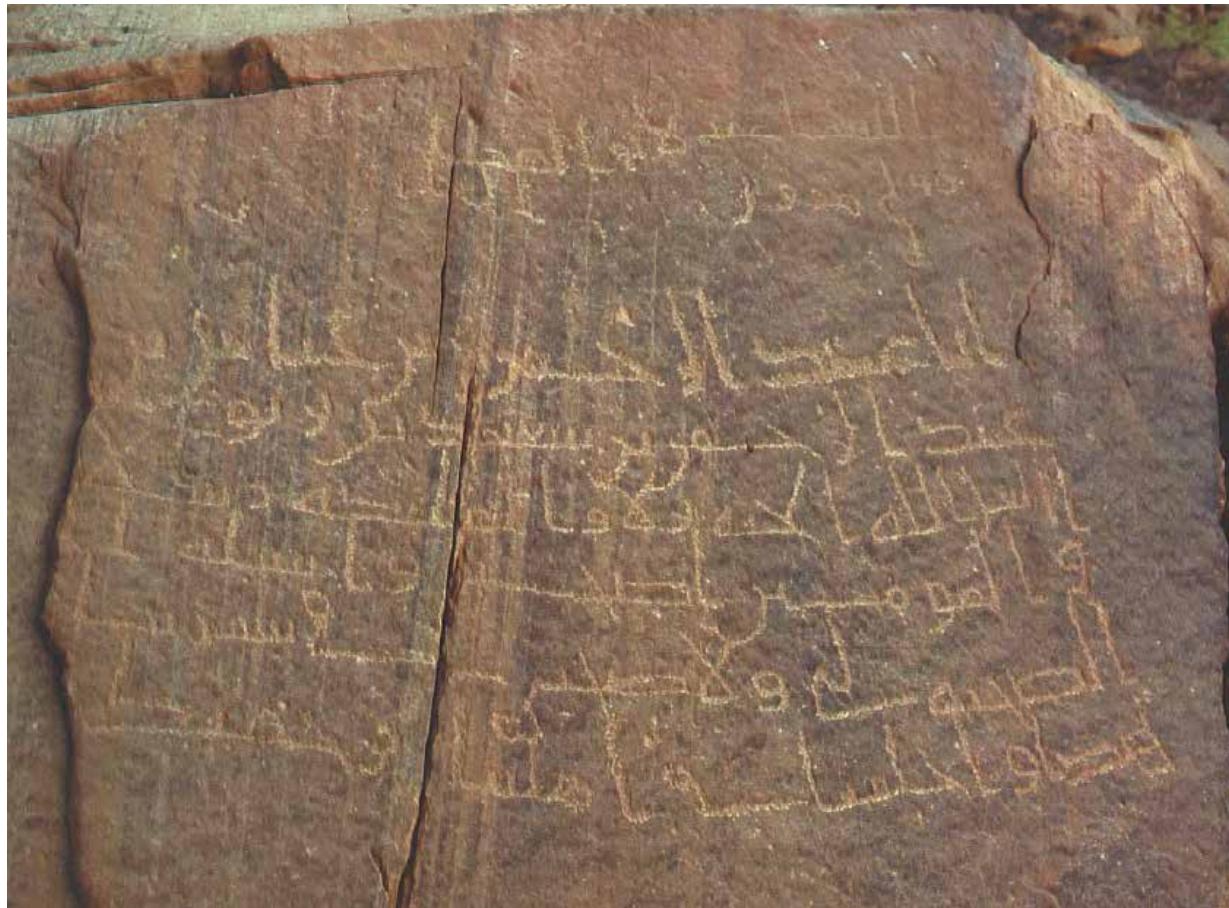
Image 9: Inscription from the Ḥismà (Photograph: Al-Saʿīd et al. 2018: 66-67)

written one. The accusative termination *an* (*tanwīn alif*), is correctly spelled as <ʾ> in all cases. No *plene* spellings of this feature with an <n> are documented. The definite article is never spelled phonetically; it is written morphologically as *ʾl-* no matter its assimilatory environment. And words are never misparsed to suggest that the authors were writing uninterpretable strings of sounds; the interrogative/indefinite relative *mā*, for example, is never written as a prefix but as an independent word spelled <mʾ>. To illustrate, consider the following pious graffito:

1) *ʾnʾ ʿbdʾlrḥmn bn ʾbʾs bn*
'I am ʿAbd al-Raḥmān son of ʿAbbās son of
2) *ʿbdʾlrḥmn bn sʿyd bn yrbwʿ*
ʿAbd al-Raḥmān son of Saʿīd son of Yarbūʿ
3) *ʾsl ʾllh ʾl-ǧnh nzlʾ w ʾl-mlykh rslʾ*
I ask God for paradise as a resting place and the angels as messengers
4) *w ʾl-mwmnyn ʾṣḥbʾ w-ʾsl-h ʾ...*
and the believers as companions and I ask him ...
5) *ʾl-ṣḥbh ly w-l-ʾṣḥby fy sfr-nʾ*
That I and my companions have companionship during this journey
6) *hḏʾ w-ʾḫlf-nʾ fy ʾhl-nʾ b-rḥmt-k*
of ours and watch over our family with your mercy'

In this representative composition, there are many places where the orthographic depth of Arabic could have led to spelling errors, but they are not to be found. The article is spelled correctly despite its contextual pronunciation. The accusative termination *-an* is spelled with an *alif* ʾ correctly, unlike in the modern inscriptions where we often find it written with *n*. Morphological spellings, like the initial *alif* before the imperative verb following the conjugation *wa-*, are correctly realized, thus *wa-ḫluf* is spelled <wʾḫlf> rather than something like <wḫlf> as one would expect in the modern period.

The text deviates from modern Arabic orthography, however, in the spelling of a few words like *ʾsl* 'I ask', but this reflects the ancient Ḥiǧāzī pronunciation *ʾasal* rather than Classical Arabic *ʾasʾalu* <ʾsʾl>. Internal long *ā* is rarely written, but its consistency shows that it has to do with ancient orthographic praxis rather than a hesitation

regarding vowel length as in the modern inscriptions. Deviations from nascent Classical Arabic norms were nonetheless systematic and rule-bound, not the result of educational deficiencies. They simply reflect a time when different norms were in place.[11]

Since systematic databases are lacking for Arabic inscriptions of any period, we are unable to engage in any comprehensive statistical analysis between the two corpora. Rather, we must focus on one significant, and undeniable, observation – that modern Arabic inscriptions display deviations of language and orthography in ways that are almost entirely absent in the ancient corpus of Arabic graffiti. This clear distribution must be indicative of something, but what? As such, the lack of mistakes points towards writing being a more specialized skill among a smaller segment of the population. Another complementary understanding presents itself as well. It is possible, and indeed logical, that the linguistic distance between the vernacular and the written language was much smaller in ancient times, and what have come to be orthographic conventions were in those days still phonetic spellings.[12] Perhaps the total absence of the spelling of the accusative ending *an* as *n*, as in the modern inscriptions, stems not from the perfect mastery of this morpho-orthographic rule, but rather that the indefinite accusative ending was widely pronounced as it was written, namely, *ā*. Strong arguments for this have already been made.[13] Nevertheless, there are clear cases where we must be

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11 - A consistent deviation from the norm is the spelling of the imperative 'to bless' as <ṣly> in the early Islamic inscriptions rather than the expected <ṣl>. Its frequency speaks against it being some mistake but rather reflecting a different linguistic register where the imperative terminated in a long rather than short vowel, ṣallī vs ṣalli (Lindstedt 2021: 431, n. 60). This the subject of a forthcoming comprehensive study by my PhD student Cody Beasley.

12 - The classic, and now outdated, discussion of the status of diglossia in the early Islamic period is Blau 1977. See Al-Jallad 2020b for a reappraisal.

13 - See the introduction of Al-Jallad 2020b, and various places throughout that work.

dealing with morphological spellings, like when it comes to the definite article being rendered as ʾl- in nearly all circumstances, and so even if Arabic's orthographic depth was shallower in the early Islamic period, it was still not near-phonetic.

This hypothesis finds further support when we turn our attention to pre-modern Arabic inscriptions carved in a less confident hand. Lindstedt furnishes us with a collection of (relatively) early Islamic Arabic inscriptions from the Jordanian Ḥarrah (Lindstedt 2024), dating roughly to the same period as most of the material published by al-Saʿīd et al. (2018). Most of these texts are composed in well-formed Classical Arabic, adhering to the expected orthographic conventions. Expected deviations occur in the representation of the glottal stop (hamzah) and the length of the imperative vowel in ṣallī. Beyond this, the texts exhibit none of the diglossic misparsings of the modern inscriptions, with a notable exception, Inscription 9 (pg. 50). Lindstedt points out that the inscription was carved in a very insecure hand, which strongly suggests its author lacked formal education or regular practice in writing. This exceptional

case proves the rule.

Reading and translation by Lindstedt (2024: 50), modified by Ahmad Al-Jallad.

1) ʾllhm ġfr l-ǧnḥ bn ʾlḥwšb
O God, forgive Ǧanāḥ son of al-Ḥawshab
2) ḏnb-h qdm-h w ḥdṯ-h rb w q-h ḥr
his earlier and later sins, O my Lord, and protect him against the heat
3) sqr ʾn-hʾ sʾt mzlʾ w-bsʾt
of the hellfire (saqar)! It is foul as a resting place (read: manzilan?) and the most calamitous[?]
4) ʾl-mstqr rb w ġfr l-mn qlʾmn
final destination, O my Lord, and forgive whosoever says "Amen."

This inscriptions is undated, but could fit comfortably in the first few Islamic centuries. Its author seems to have committed a number of phonetic spellings, notably, perhaps, the assimilation of the n in the word manzilā as <mzlʾ> /mazzilā/ and the omission of any graphic represrntation of the intial vowel of the imperative, iġfir as


Image 10: Inscription #9 from Lindstedt 2024 (Photograph: BES 2018).

<ġfr> rather than <ʾġfr>. The final phrase *man qāla ʾāmīn* has been written as two words instead of three, ignoring the boundary between the verb *qāla* 'he said' and *ʾāmīn* 'Amen', which is incidentatly written defectively as well without the penultimate <y>. This spelling reflects a purely phonetic transcription of the phrase as a continuous string of sounds, without any attempt to segment it into distinct words. Finally, some dialectalisms are detectable. The difficult phrase *w-bsʿt ʾl-mstqr* is probably best understood as *bāsāt al-mustaqarr*. The first word would correspond to normative Arabic *baʾsāʾ* 'difficulty, calamity'. The loss of the glottal stop is seen elsewhere in this inscription, producing *bāsā*. Now, the word is in construct and it is common in many forms of modern Arabic to treat words terminating in an a-class vowel, no matter its etymological origin, as feminine when suffixes are attached. Thus, the word *maʿnā* 'meaning' (etymologically *mʿny*) becomes *manʿāt-*, e.g. *maʿnāto* 'its meaning.' If this interpretation is correct, we may have an early record of this linguistic development carved in stone. Unlike the other inscriptions from this period, this poorly carved specimen, indicative of low literacy, predictably contains errors in areas of significant orthographic depth, and bears witness to the divergence between spoken and written Arabic.

4. Concluding Remarks

This preliminary, albeit anecdotal to some degree, comparison between modern and ancient Arabic graffiti has brought into relief two important issues when it comes to the history of Arabic writing. First, it demonstrates the impact of the Arabic script's orthographic depth on the realization of an inscription. Without deliberate education, writers are not likely to spell Arabic words and phrases in a normative way. As Van Putten (2023) has convincingly argued, this orthographic depth demonstrates that the early Arabic script is not comparable to near-phonetic writing systems like Safaitic, but instead must have been developed, regulated, and standardized within a scribal educational context. This argument is underscored by the nature of the modern Arabic inscriptions found in the Ḥarrah, which, being created under circumstances comparable to their Safaitic predecessors and lacking a thorough educational curriculum, exhibit considerable orthographic irregularities. Finally, a comparison of the modern corpus of Arabic graffiti from the Ḥarrah and the early Islamic Arabic graffiti from the Ḥismà reveals that the educational and linguistic environment in which these two groups of texts were carved was significantly different. The full implications of this observation require further study.
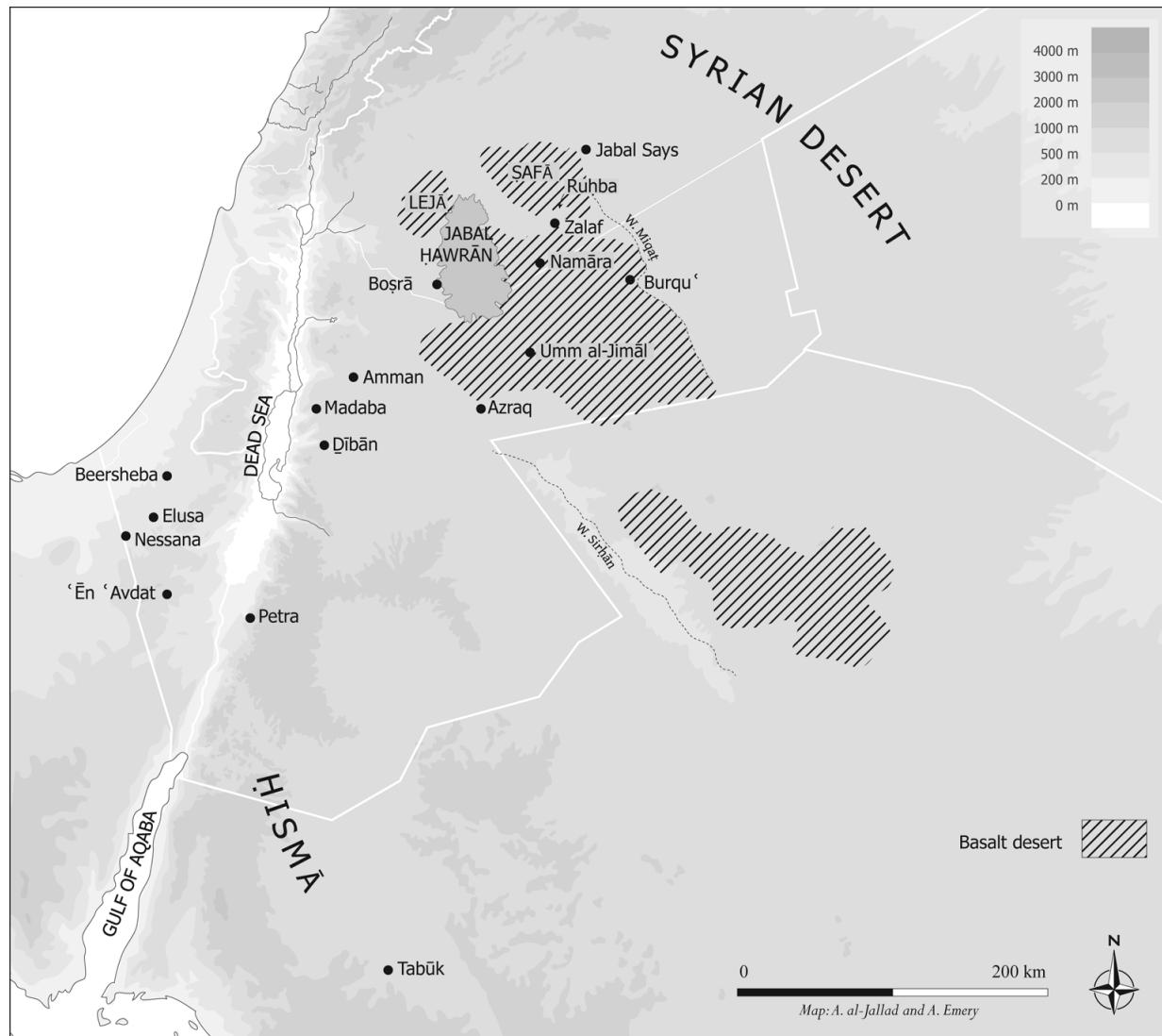
Map 1: The Ḥarrah (A. Al-Jallad and A. Emery)

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