

E. Rezvan

FROM SYRIAC TO ARABIC

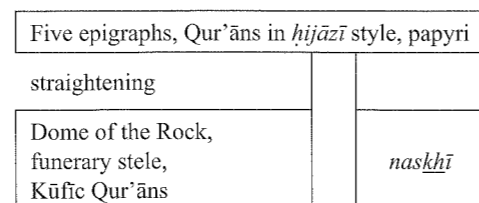
(NOTES ON PROF. SERGIO NOJA NOSEDA THEORY OF THE ARABIC SCRIPT ORIGIN)

These notes are an attempt to write quite an unusual review: a review of non-published texts of presentations, e-mails, comments made in the course of discussions during the breaks of sessions of various congresses, in the course of lengthy discussions over a cup of coffee or a glass of cognac, which have taken place over the last few months in different parts of the world, but primarily in Lesa (Italy), Cairo and Alexandria. These presentations, e-mails and comments belong to an outstanding Italian specialist in Arabic studies and Islam Prof. Sergio Noja Nosedá. Today Prof. Nosedá, or Serega, as he calls himself in Russian in our correspondence, is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding specialists in such a specific sphere as the early history of the text of the Qur'ān.

Because of the *Amari project* (*Sources de la transmission manuscrite du texte coranique*) [1] with the goal of introducing into scholarly circulation the most important early copies of the Qur'ān from various collections Prof. Noja has today at his disposal almost the whole range of the early Qur'ānic texts made in *hijāzī* script. This gives him a unique opportunity to conduct "through" analysis of the early Islamic hand-written monuments.

It is known, that even despite the advances of the new information technologies, current publications are always behind the contemporary level of the development of science. It will take no less than one or two years before theoretical theses formulated in the course of a scientific discussion, become "cluttered" with detailed argumentation and references to the sources and come out published in the form of articles. It will take three or four more years before a monograph is prepared which will contain articles as fragments. The format of our journal, as it seems, allows to react more quickly to the most important elements of the current scientific discussion. The present review is an attempt of such reaction.

Many years of work with various sources and the analysis of a large volume of manuscripts allowed Prof. Noja to formulate a new theory of origin of Arabic script as well as his own idea of correlation between its different variants which circulated in the first and second centuries after Hijra. Schematically this correlation is shown in the following table:



The suggested scheme, in my opinion, needs some specifications, but I completely agree with the fundamental conclusion to which Prof. Noja comes and which is connected with the hypothesis about the origin of Arabic script not from the Nabataean, but from Syriac one. Prof. Noja presented his concept in detail during a lecture given in the University of al-Azhar this year, in the middle of January.

In Arabia on the eve of the 7th c. AD there existed *two scriptural traditions*, namely, that closely linked to Northwest Arabia (connected with Lakhmid al-Hīra) and the area around the Syrian border (connected with Ghassanid areas). This seems to be very natural. Research on the differentiation and integration of dialects in pre-Islamic Arabia has shown that the highly developed structure and relatively stable and regular grammatical and lexical systems evident in the earliest Arabic texts — pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān — testify to a long period during which grammatical forms took shape and were selected. By the time of Muḥammad's preaching, there were two large dialect zones in Central Arabia: Eastern (called Tamīm) and Western, known as Hijāz. The border between them lay somewhere in the middle of the Najd.

As a result up to the mid- and possibly late eighth century, *two ways* of copying the text of the Qur'ān developed *in parallel*, each with its own internal evolution and each influencing the other. They were genetically connected to the two Arabian cultural and political centres, which gravitated, respectively, to Syria and to Mesopotamia (vertical format + *hijāzī* script and horizontal format + *kūfī* script). In the set of the "Seven readings" we also have two groups connected with Eastern and Western parts of Arabia.

The coincidence of the 'Abbāsīd *dawla* in 750 with the subsequent loss of influence suffered by the Syro-Jaziran elite and the gradual supplanting of the type of Sacred book which went back to the Syrian tradition (vertical format + *hijāzī* script) is far from accidental.

A combination of interconnected political events, cultural accomplishments and internal religious and social requirements connected with the community's self-identification led to the gradual supplanting of the "Syrian" tradition.

The revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth century convincingly demonstrate the connection between political events and the questions of culture. One has only to recall the reform of Russian orthography undertaken by the Bolsheviks. Books of the new era had to look new, bearing obvious witness to the depth of change within society. Contemporaries to the events connected with the 'Abbāsīd revolution undoubtedly understood the striving of the new Mesopotamia- and Khurāsān-oriented elite to inscribe its victory on the form of the Sacred book. They did this by turning away from the tradition connected with their vanquished opponents and by affirming a variant close to the Mesopotamian cultural orbit. The victory of the 'Abbāsīds coincided with new achievements in the unification of Arabic grammar and the growing mastery of calligraphers and ornamentalists. The Kūfic manuscripts created in the ninth century, copied in a monumental and significantly more regular script with the obligatory employment of diacritics and marks of vocalisation, adorned with carefully copied ornaments in gold and with intricate dividers between *āyāt* and *ajzā'*, formatted horizontally to set them apart instantly from other Scriptures and books, would undoubtedly best the outwardly unimpressive *hijāzī* copies. Everything about their appearance indicated that a new era had begun in the community. These changes as well as qualitative leap in the unification level of the Qur'ānic manuscripts are being fixed by numerous sources. That is why several Western researches were able to advance a hypothesis that the final stage of the Qur'ānic text fixation took place not later than the 9th c. AD [2].

But let us turn to the problem of the origin of the Arabic script. According to Prof. Noja during the latest decades

"too much effort has been put into examining the shape of the marks, to the detriment of the general vision of how this writing was copied. Everyone agrees that Arabic writing did not spring forth *ex nihilo*, and as regards its origin the Islamic component and that of Western scholars are interwoven and even mixed".

According to him

"a parallel may be drawn with the square Hebrew characters that emerged on the return from Babylon, imitating the small squares and rectangles of the cuneiform characters [3]. It has always been difficult to say openly that these were copied. Indeed, how could one ever say in Israel that the writing had been borrowed from their ferocious enemies of Mesopotamia? In the same way for Arabic writing there has perhaps been a wish to draw a veil over the matter — how could one ever say, at the peak of Islamic history, that it had been copied, at least as a general concept, from a single and exclusively Christian script like that of Syriac? But in reality in both cases the earlier tradition said it clearly. As regards the Arabic one, one can read about it in the modern De Prémare [4], if one does not wish to resort to Prince Caetani, although the way

Nabia Abbot treated this subject remains extremely interesting [5].

But if this is valid for members of the two religions, I do not understand why this managerial vision was lacking in the West in the generations that preceded us, beginning with Nöldeke, who almost accidentally deviated from the course set by Silvestre de Sacy [6], to which certain works that are now classics have returned in recent decades, and continuing up to the final works of Françoise Briquel-Chantonnet [7].

Even in the West there was a wish to reject, relying on details of the shapes and without a general vision, the fact that the two main aspects of a script such as Arabic, and specifically its alignment on a line below and the break after certain specific characters can only come from Syriac in general terms. The vision of more modern Western scholars, with many second thoughts that are all to his credit, is that of John Healey [8].

Anyhow it is evident that Christian cultural and missionary centres existed in Lakhmid and Ghassanid princedoms have to be the cradle of the Arabic script.

The problem of the existence of Arabic translations of the texts of the Bible circulated in pre-Islamic Arabia produced a considerable number of works, even though it is still far from any definite solution. Not going into the details of the discussion [9], let us consider only several facts. The Christian character of the most ancient known Arabic inscriptions allows to suggest that the system of writing which we know as Arabic was probably developed (like many other similar Oriental systems) by Christian missionaries somewhere in the region of al-Hīra or al-Anbār [10]. It is not by pure chance that among those who were the first to write in Arabic the tradition names Zayd b. Ḥamād (*ca.* AD 500) and his son, the famous poet 'Adī b. Zayd, who lived in al-Hīra [11], and that the best speaker of the pre-Islamic past was Quss b. Sā'ida, who was also connected with Arabian Christians (possibly — of Najrān) [12].

In Damascus four parchment leaves were found with the Arabic text of the 77th Psalm written in Greek script. The scholar who published it dates the text to the ninth century; such specialists, however, as Bernard Levin and Nabia Abbot consider that it possibly could be dated back to the sixth century [13]. A. Baumstark thought that some of the manuscripts containing Arabic translations of the texts of the Scriptures could be attributed to the pre-Islamic period. G. Graf and S. Griffith actively argued with him [14]. There is some indirect evidence that as early as the fourth century liturgy in Arabic, including corresponding texts from the Old and the New Testament, could be served in Iraq, Syria and in Himyarit South Arabia [15]. The verses by pre-Islamic poets, especially by poets-monotheists, contain numerous parallels with the Bible which deserve special attention [16].

The almost word-by-word parallelism of the Qur'ānic *āyāt* corresponding to the text of the Scriptures (21:105 — Ps. 37:29; 5:45 — Ex. 21:23—5 and Lev. 27:17—20; 7:40 — Matt. 19:24) is evident.

Preliminary observations over the Arabian epic lore recorded by the Qur'ān and accepted by the early Islamic exegetics demonstrate that these legends had possibly undergone Christian editing in the pre-Islamic time. In this case, however, a special investigation is required.

I remember well seeing on an Internet site several years ago a photo of a text from Syriac Gospels in a folio of the famous Codex Sinaiticus (4th c. AD), bought in 1869 in the Monastery of St. Catherine at the foot of Mt. Sinai by Prof. Tischendorf and in 1933 sold by the Bolsheviks to the British Library. At that moment I had on my desk a photograph of one of the folios of "the Qur'an of 'Uthmān", found in Katta-Langar (Uzbekistan). At this moment my girlfriend, whose job is in no way connected with Oriental palaeography, entered my study. Having glanced at the two photos and having decided they belonged to the same

manuscript, she asked: "Have you already published your photos on the site?"

I don't know if we will ever find out the names of the Arabic Cyril and Methodius, who must have worked in the monasteries in North Arabia on the turn of the 6th—7th centuries. Obviously, we will need additional discoveries of hand-written or epigraphic fragments to prove the existence of the pre-Islamic variant of "Kūfīc". I have asked Prof. Noja to present in our journal a detailed version of his concept connected with the origin of Arabic literature. I hope, that we will be able to publish his article as early as in the next issue of the *Manuscripta*.

Notes

1. F. Déroche, Sergio Noja Noseda, *Sources de la transmission manuscrite du texte coranique. Les manuscrits de style ḥiǧāzī*, i (Lesa, 1999), ii/1 (Lesa, 2001). The first two issues dealt with the publication of the most important copies from the Paris National Library and the British Library. In subsequent volumes the authors plan to publish manuscripts and fragments on parchment from Ṣan'ā', Istanbul, Tuebingen, the Vatican, Vienna, and less well-known centres, as well as Qur'ānic epigraphy, graffiti, and inscriptions on various everyday objects.
2. For details see: H. Motzki, "The Collection of the Qur'ān: A Reconsideration of the Western Views in the Light of Recent Methodological Developments", *Qur'ānic Studies on the Eve of the 21st century* (Indonesian-Netherlands Cooperation in Islamic Studies, 10—20 June, 1998, Leiden University), pp. 5—14.
3. Noseda, "L'assunzione di forme quadrate nella scrittura aramaica e il proto-arabo", *Rendiconti dell'Istituto Lombardo, Classe di Lettere e Scienze Morali e Storiche*, CXXV (1992), ii, pp. 269—75.
4. A. de Prémare, *Les fondations de l'Islam* (Paris, 2002), p. 442.
5. N. Abbott, *The Rise of the North Arabic Script and Its Kur'anic Development, with a Full Description of the Kur'an Manuscripts in the Oriental Institute* (Chicago, 1939).
6. A. I. Silvestre de Sacy, *Memoire sur l'origine et les anciens monuments de la litterature parmi les arabes*, now in Déroche, Noseda, *op. cit.*, p. LII.
7. F. Briquel-Chatonnet, "De l'araméen à l'arabe: quelque réflexions sur la genèse de l'écriture arabe", *Scribes et manuscrits du Moyen-Orient*, ed. by F. Déroche (Paris, 1997), pp. 135—49.
8. "...strongly influenced by Syriac models" in J. F. Healey, *The Early Alphabet* (London, 1990), p. 55.
9. Abbot, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*. i: *Historical Texts* (Chicago, 1957), pp. 46—50; Carra de Vaux — [G. C. Anawati], "Injil", *EF* (Leiden, 1986), iii, p. 1205; Ch. Rabin, "Arabiyya. (II). The Literary language. (I). Classical Arabic", *ibid.*, i, p. 564. In the introduction to Origen's "Hexapla" (third century AD) it is mentioned that the author used in his works translations of the Bible into Chaldean and Arabic. The first one meant Syriac, what Origen defined as Arabic is not clear, see A. F. L. Beeston, "Background topics", *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. A. F. L. Beeston, T. M. Johnstone, R. B. Serjeant, and G. R. Smith (Cambridge, 1983), p. 23; I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, 1984), pp. 418—9, 422—30, 515—7.
10. N. Abbot, *The Rise of the North Arabic Script*, p. 5.
11. Abu al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī* (Book of Songs) (al-Qāhira, 1345), ii, pp. 100—2.
12. A. Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* (Vienna, 1971), ii, pp. 7—33; Shahid, *op. cit.*, pp. 409—22; Ch. Pellat, "Ḳuss b. Sā'ida", *EF*, v, p. 528.
13. Beeston, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
14. A. Baumstark, "Das Problem eines vorislamischen christlichen arabischen Schrifttums in Arabischer Sprachen", *Islamica*, IV (1931), pp. 562—75; S. Griffith, "The Gospel in Arabic: an enquiry into its appearance in the first Abbasid century", *Oriens Christianus*, LXIX (1985), pp. 126—67.
15. Shahid, *op. cit.*, pp. 435—43.
16. E. Rezvan, "The Qur'ān and its world: I. The Problem of reconstructing ancient Arabian cosmogonic and anthropogenetic lore", *Manuscripta Orientalia*, II/4 (1996), pp. 30—4. N. Abbot, considering the way to solve the problem of the existence of the pre-Islamic Arabic Bible, suggested a combined study of passages from the Bible cited in the seventh—tenth century Arabic manuscripts. In our opinion, even if we take into account the problem of falsification, it would be of great interest to analyze the corresponding verse of pre-Islamic Arabic poets.

IN MEMORIAM

PROFESSOR SEVIR B. CHERNETSOV (1943—2005)

Sevir Chernetsov's heart stopped beating on February, 3. A day before, when colleagues called him to discuss his paper for *Manuscripta Orientalia*, his wife Milena answered: "Sevir is unwell, please, call him tomorrow". Alas, that "tomorrow" never came... It is a severe blow to the Ethiopian and African studies in Russia, which is difficult to repair.

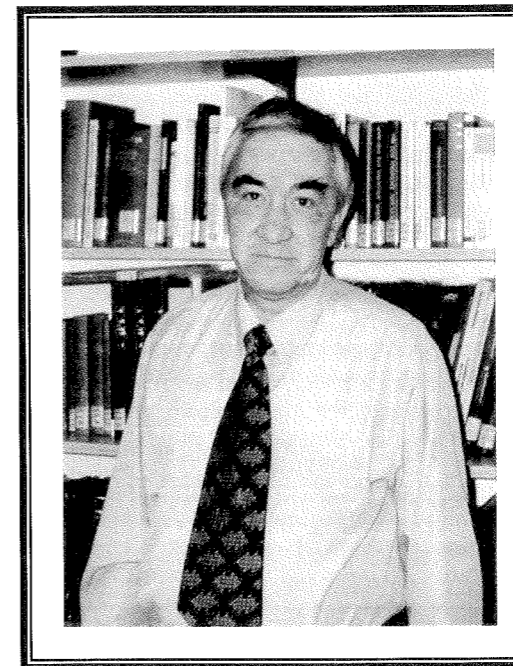
I first met him when I was a student at the Oriental Department of the University. My teacher of Manding, Svetlana Tomchina, asked me to take a book to the Institute of Ethnography, namely to Sevir Chernetsov: "You'll recognize him at once, he looks very medieval!" These characteristics came to my mind recently, when Sevir drew my attention to a large-size picture at the entrance door of his apartment: an old Ethiopian monk with a manuscript under his armpit at the entrance of a cave monastery. He said: "This is my Ethiopian alter ego".

It was true, Sevir was medieval, in the sense that he was a true paladin of Knowledge. It happened to us more than once that his severe judgement of somebody, or his refusal to take on a promising to everybody) raised in the long run all his decisions and many of those who was angry with him. Sevir Chernetsov was against which he checked his collections too. It is Sevir's "golden most of all."

Sevir Chernetsov was born on (Central Russia), where his mother Leningrad, and his father, Boris visited her occasionally when war, his family returned to Leningrad a student of the "male English high standard of education. Then, it Oriental Faculty of the Leningrad every student studied Kiswahili, time, and it was at the upper grades opted for Ethiopian studies, and

At that time, Dmitry Olderozge both at the Oriental Faculty and at the Institute of Ethnography Sevir Chernetsov graduated from on as his personal assistant at the Institute (as a member of the Academy of Sciences, he had a right to have an assistant), and, at the same time, gave him a topic for a thesis, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls: An Essay of Philological and Ethnographic Study*.

Sevir Chernetsov defended his PhD Thesis (more precisely, "Candidate in Science") seven years later — much more than it is usually expected. One of Sevir's favourite sayings was: "Who harnesses slow, rides fast". After a slow start (which is quite understandable, taking into account the real complexity of the chosen topic), he astonished his colleagues with his prolificacy: between 1974 and 1991, he published three thick volumes of commented translations of Ethiopian chronicles (*Ethiopian Chronicles of 14th through 16th Centuries* (Moscow, 1984); *Ethiopian Chronicles of 17th through 18th Centuries* (Moscow, 1989); *Ethiopian Chronicles of 18th Century* (Moscow, 1991)) and two monographs (*Ethiopian Feudal Monarchy in 13th through 16th Centuries* (Moscow, 1982)); this book was defended in 1984 as Sevir Chernetsov's Doctoral Degree; *Ethiopian Feudal Monarchy in 17 Century* (Moscow, 1990). His sixth book, *Ethiopia in the Course of the First Sixteen*



body's dissertation revolted every-young man (who seemed very general indignation. But, strikingly, judgements proved to be valid, and him, finally recognized his right—a holder of the "golden standard", leagues, their writings, and his own standard" that many of us will miss

December 15, 1943 in Kostroma was an evacuee from the blockaded Chernetsov, a military engineer, passing by on assignment. After the grad, where he was in 1951—61 school" No. 213, renowned for its was the African Department at the State University. At that time, Hausa and Amhara at the same that they made their choice. Sevir never deviated from this path.

was the head of African Department of the Leningrad State University of the Academy of Sciences. When the University, Olderozge took him

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Plate 1. No. 13-24. Kawahara Keiga, "A view of a highway station", *Nihon Fukei-zu (Views of Japan)*. Edo Period (19th c.). Painting unformatted, colour on silk, gold, 71.2 × 79.3 cm (whole), 52.5 × 62.3 cm (painting), no seal, no signature.

Back cover:

Plate 2. No. 13-34/39(8). *Idem*, "A visit to a Shinto shrine", *Life of Japanese people*. Edo Period (19th c.). Painting unformatted (album folio), colour on silk, gold, 35.1 × 46.3 cm (whole), 32.3 × 44.3 cm (painting), no seal, no signature.

Plate 3. No. 13-34/39(35). *Idem*, "Wedding ceremony", *ibid.* Edo Period (19th c.). Painting unformatted (album folio), colour on silk, gold, 32.5 × 44.5 cm, no seal, no signature.

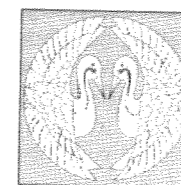
Plate 4. No. 13-34/39(17). *Idem*, "A greeting of the bridegroom's family by a representative of the house of the bride", *ibid.* Edo Period (19th c.). Painting unformatted (album folio), colour on silk, gold, 32.2 × 44.0 cm, no seal, no signature.

Plate 5. No. 13-34/39(30). *Idem*, "A scene at a cemetery", *ibid.* Edo Period (19th c.). Painting unformatted (album folio), colour on silk, 32.3 × 44.4 cm, no seal, no signature.

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