THE ARABIC ALPHABET

script. Its firm rootedness to the line of writing and its angular forms could have been inspired by *estrangelo* Syriac. As already noted, the idea of diacritics may have been taken over from Syriac – they barely appear at all in Nabataean. The calligraphic tradition of Syriac may have prompted the beginnings of Arabic calligraphy, an Islamic art in which the Muslims could outperform the Christians.

### Dates of Major Developments

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III - The Earliest Arabic Scripts – Pre- and Early Islamic Inscriptions

In the first two chapters we have considered the basic principles behind the alphabet and the history of alphabetic scripts in the pre-Islamic period. Chapter II has suggested that the best explanation of the origins of the early script of the Arabic papyri is to be found in the cursive Nabataean script. In continuing this discussion, we now consider some of the earliest evidence of the writing of Arabic itself.

As we have seen, our quest to locate and to trace the development of the early Arabic script begins in pre-Islamic times, in the third century CE to be precise, with a series of lapidary inscriptions found in the area of Greater Syria and the northern Arabian Peninsula. The term “lapidary” refers to writings on stone (Latin *lapidarius*, “related to stone”), often brief and formalized.

From time immemorial, humans had been committing their thoughts to the stone all around them which nature had provided in massive quantities. In the various dialects of Aramaic (see Chapter II) and in the languages of pre-Islamic Arabia, Safaitic, Libyanite, Thamudic etc., desert travellers,
local passers-by and herders had been recording their journeys, remembering their dead, or perhaps recording the building of a permanent structure. These are the texts by means of which we can seek to illustrate how the Arabic script which is familiar to us today slowly developed from its immediate Nabataean predecessor.

Twenty or so such lapidary inscriptions which have a bearing on the origin of the Arabic script are now available to us in scholarly studies, some only one or two words long, others of greater length. These inscriptions, the earliest of which are in the Nabataean language, show clear signs that the script is developing into the Arabic script that we recognize today, although dots to distinguish otherwise identical letters are not yet to be found. The most famous inscription of this group by far is the so-called Namāra inscription which can be dated precisely to 328 CE and a very great deal of ink has been spilt over the years in trying to provide some definitive reading. However, of major interest there is mention in the text of the famous king of Kinda, Imru’ al-Qays, and, if we could be surer of the meaning, its historical potential must surely be immense.

However, there is no doubt that the 268 CE Raqūsh funerary inscription, a funerary document at Madā'in Ṣāliḥ in present-day Saudi Arabia (Illustration 4), is written primarily in Arabic with a few Aramaicisms (like the date for example) and that it is the earliest dated Arabic document so far uncovered. The script, however, remains Nabataean and we cannot yet begin to recognize distinct Arabic script-forms.

At about the same time as the Namāra inscription was being produced, the first inscription which shows clear resemblance to the Arabic script came into being (Illustration 8). It was found in Jabal Ramm near Aqaba and can be safely dated to the first half of the fourth century CE. A precise description of the script is difficult, for the text is written with some square features typical of epigraphic Arabic, and yet the fourth line appears more cursive. In particular, one can discern an Arabic final bā’ medially lām, followed by yā’ and final mīm. An initial jīm/bā’/kha’, an initial alif-lām and a word which appears to begin with mīm, sīn/shīn, alif can be seen.

A tentative leap into the fifth, perhaps the sixth, century is now necessary and we arrive at the important stepping stone of Umm al-Jimāl (Illustration 9) with its distinctly square features. The stone slab on which the inscription appears has been damaged and covered with plaster, but here one can clearly read the name ‘Abd Allab bn (i.e. ibn) ‘Ubayd. An alif-lām and what could be the Arabic word ‘ala, as well as final mīm, can be read.

To complete the survey of pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions, that of Harran should mentioned, with the clear date 568 CE.
It is a Greek-Arabic bilingual inscription on the martyrion of St John, containing the name Sharāḥīl bar Zālim.

Our story now moves on into the Islamic era. In 2002, what is so far the earliest Islamic Arabic inscription was discovered in the south-west of Saudi Arabia. It is dated 23/643-4 (i.e. AH 23 = 643-4 CE). It is a simple four-word graffito with a clear date. The script is a square Kufic with no dots to distinguish letters. The University of Riyadh Department of Archaeology has long been excavating along the Iraqi pilgrim route in Saudi Arabia and in 1977 there was published as part of their data a dated Arabic inscription of 56/676. With little effort, the following features can be made out: initial alif, with its hook at the bottom of the letter turning to the right, initial and medial lam, medial bāʾ and final mim (without a tail), here and in the third word; initial ghamm, medial faʾa and final raʾ which is to be compared with the final dāl in the following word, where there is a distinct upward turn, a longer base line and a small notch at its end. Other features include two clear words, bn, and the name ʿAli, with the tail of the final yaʾ returning to the right to underline the whole word.

Still in the field of inscriptions, though looking much more like the Arabic to which we are used, is a series of texts dating from the first century of Islam/seventh century CE and found within the Arabian Peninsula. Three can be mentioned in some detail. The first is an inscription on a dam near al-Ṭaʾif and the so-called Kufic style of writing is beginning to show itself. It is dated 58/677 and is of great importance because of the clear dots which can be seen and which are used to distinguish otherwise identical letters. One can make out the letters baʾ, taʾ, thāʾ, mim and yaʾ by the number and position of the dots which are featured almost exactly as we would see them today.

More first/seventh century examples are the two from Mecca dated 80/699. Both contain quotations from the Qurʾan. Despite its obvious epigraphic appearance and its evident square features, it gives the distinct impression of a cursive hand. The two are the work of the same hand and the author was a certain ʿUthmān. The hand has already rid itself of clear Nabataean influence and is to be linked closely with the early Kufic Quran manuscripts which are dealt with in the following chapter.

An important development of the Arabic script during this first century of Islam was its use in a monumental inscription, that of the famous Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (Illustration 10). The interior and exterior band of inscriptions is inlaid in mosaic, gold on a blue background. The date is given 72/691. The inscription mentions the construction of the mosque and is otherwise a collection of Quranic verses. Interestingly, some of these verses do not tally with the eventual Uthmanic version of the text and there are slight orthographic differences. Of utmost interest is the use of dots to distinguish letters, albeit in an unusual way (e.g. three dots
10. Monumental Inscription, Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem

in a line for one shin, three dots, one above the others for another; two dots one above the other for la’). Also it is clear that this is the forerunner of the monumental Kufic script which played such a huge part as a major architectural feature throughout the centuries after the advent of Islam.

To sum up, we can see that from about the fourth century CE through to the seventh, the first of the Islamic calendar, the Arabic script was developing out of the Nabataean script, and the Arabic inscriptions, all incidentally in the general area of Greater Syria and the northern Arabian Peninsula, take on a script form which we readily recognize from our knowledge of the script today. It was not, however, until the first/seventh century that we see for the first time dots being used to distinguish various letters which would otherwise be identical. Still to come (below) and closely connected with the text of the Quran and its precise understanding are vowel signs, signs which enable the reader to read short vowels and diphthongs correctly.

Since the third millennium BCE, papyrus has been manufactured in Egypt to provide writing material. The papyrus reed (Cyperus papyrus) grows in abundance in the marshy areas of the Nile valley. Strips cut or torn the length of the triangular-shaped stem, set at right angles, are beaten together and the plant’s natural juices provide the adhesion necessary for a stable writing surface. While papyrus is perhaps predominantly associated with ancient Egyptian writings, it was also used for the writing of Aramaic (including Nabataean) and there is a considerable corpus of Arabic papyri in different libraries throughout the world and the scripts employed are of relevance to our story.

The earliest extant Arabic papyrus dates from the first/seventh century and through time until the arrival of paper in the Middle East about the fifth/eleventh, the material was used by the literate of Egypt, whether for highly official documents or for the most casual private note. The range was enormous: legal documents, private, official and semi-official letters on many different subjects, money matters, written orders, petitions, casual notes, religious matters; the list is endless.
11. Earliest known Arabic papyrus, dated 22 (643 CE)

The earliest known Arabic papyrus (22/643) (Illustration 11) is of immense historical interest and is a receipt given by the Arab commander in Egypt during the Muslim conquest, ʿAbdallah b. Jābir, for 65 sheep for the provision of his troops. The text itself reveals a rather crude hand to our present-day way of thinking, though much can be made out from even a cursory study of the document. Not surprisingly, the whole document has a generally cursive appearance, although letters like sin and shin are given distinct teeth. Three dots (in a straight line) appear twice over the letter shin and the superscript single dot for niun, the subscript dot for fim and the superscript dot for kha. In addition, the Arabic word akbadəna, “we have taken”, has a complete set of diacritics.

Bearing in mind that the Arabic material written on papyrus covers such a vast array of different subjects and would have been written by a range of writers from government clerk to private individual, it is nevertheless possible to detect a development of the script throughout the centuries during which papyrus was in use as a writing material. The discipline of palaeography can and indeed must be applied as much in the case of papyrus as in any other genre of written material in which we are interested. Looking for example at a papyrus of the second/eighth century (Illustration 12), a semi-official request for the allocation of two post mounts, we note again a rather crude cursive script. There are no diacritical dots to distinguish letters and this serves as a timely reminder that our comments above on the existence of such dots in a first/seventh century document in no way imply that such dots were by this time common and permanent. In fact, they are used sparingly throughout the period of Arabic papyri. Another interesting feature is the continuous straight stroke to denote the sin/shin, a feature extremely common in all Arabic handwriting down to the present time.

In short, then, Arabic documents written on papyrus are attested from the first/seventh through to the fourth/eleventh century when paper, introduced from China through Central
Asia, took over as the main writing material. The subject matter is varied and both official and unofficial material is available in quantity. The scripts are cursive, generally speaking with only a sprinkling of diacritics. Other features well known even to this day in Arabic handwriting, such as the single horizontal stroke for ṡīn/shin, are found.

It is now time to turn to the strictly formal and exquisitely beautiful forms of the Arabic script as they developed over the centuries, in the first place in order to copy the text of Islam’s sacred text, the Quran.

V - The Classical Arabic Scripts
– Kufic and naskhi

The year 622 of the Christian era marks Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina, called in Arabic the hijra, and this is the beginning of the Islamic calendar. His efforts to win over the predominantly mercantile populace of Mecca had resulted in opposition and outright hostility and his migration to the agriculturally-orientated society of Medina was an astute move which eventually brought about the triumph of the new religion. During the years 622 and 10/632 when Muhammad died, the text of the Quran came into existence, although it is thought that it was only officially established as the text which we now know during the caliphate of ‘Uthmān (23-35/644-56). By this time, the Islamic community was no longer a relatively small one within the Arabian Peninsula; it was rather an expanding empire encompassing vast areas of Egypt and North Africa in the west, Greater Syria and Iraq, and Iran and beyond in the east, populated by diverse groups and nations, many of them not native Arabic users. This new Islamic community had to be supplied with an authoritative text and the practice of
copying this sacred text thus began and flourished. From earliest times, Islam as a religion seriously frowned upon the representation of the human form, so much a part of Christian iconography, and the highest art form was undoubtedly the written word. With the feverish efforts to copy the text and the ever greater artistic feeling among calligraphers, there developed the two major Arabic scripts: Kufic and naskhi, the former seemingly associated with the town in southern Iraq, Kufa, although no precise connection has ever been established, and the latter, the "copying" hand. It may be noted that the Nabataean Aramaic word for "copy" is nisba, from the same root as naskhi.

Naturally, the writing material of the scribe to a considerable extent dictated which of the two scripts he employed, and indeed how exactly he formed his handwriting within their general features. Parchment, papyrus and, later, paper would naturally lead to a more cursive style written with a pen, a type of naskhi, while lapidary inscriptions, on tombstones, buildings etc., as well as writings on metals, on coins and metalwork for example, are much more likely to steer the scribe into a squarer, more formal style, one of the various forms of Kufic.

Both Kufic and naskhi continued over the centuries and the latter is the precursor of modern printed Arabic. Both too found their way in time onto material other than parchment, papyrus or paper; both have been used extensively in architectural works, ceramics, textiles, woodwork and metalwork. We might mention here that Kufic was the norm in early and medieval coinage. It is important, however, to stress that these are not just two scripts, but rather under the heading of each we find a number of different types which are the subject of this chapter. One might perhaps add that there is no general consensus on the naming and description of what sometimes appears as a myriad of sub-divisions of both Kufic and naskhi. We have chosen what we consider to be the most important here and have tried to simplify the issue.

We shall begin with Kufic. However, mention should first be made of a very interesting script in which some of the earliest copies of the Quran were made. The script which is associated with several surviving Quranic texts of the first/seventh century from the Arabian Peninsula is called in Arabic mā‘īl, "slanting." (Illustration 13). Its immediately obvious feature is the slanting uprights of the vertical strokes, most clearly seen in the alif and the la, which slope to the right at an approximate angle of 45 degrees. It has no diacritics, nor vowel signs. It is an angular script rather than a cursive and must thus be seen as the forerunner of Kufic.

The Kufic Quran has reached its fully developed form by the end of the second/eighth century (Illustration 14). It was invariably written on parchment, the letters in a black ink with dots, often red and green (the latter used with initial hamza) though sometimes in gold only, representing short vowels, and black strokes, single and double, distinguishing letters. The text thus written is made difficult by the spacing which would seem to be more to do with the calligrapher's artistic inclinations and his desire to justify his text precisely than with Arabic orthography. "Justification" here refers to what became the standard practice in printed books of making the lines even in length both at the beginning and at the end of
the lines. Verse endings and other pauses call for gold: usually a cluster of three balls, one sitting on two others and quite elaborate roundels. Readers should note that final \textit{mim} now has acquired a tiny tail and final \textit{nin} does not yet form the semi-circle which we see in the \textit{naskhī} script. Frequently, marginal illuminations can be found in gold and chapter headings too are written in gold. The codices produced for such Kufic Qurans have a horizontal format, the top and bottom of each leaf being longer than the two sides, what in today's computerized printing is called "landscape" as contrasted with "portrait".

From about the late fourth/tenth century, one begins to detect a distinct western development, western Kufic (Illustration 15), with its origins in North Africa and which was to herald
an entirely distinctive Maghrebi script later (see below, Chapter VI). As if in reply at about the same time or a little later, we see an eastern Kufic (Illustration 16), appearing in Iraq and Iran. Both continued to rely on the strong black ink to make the forms of the letters and − in the early stages at any rate − they used coloured dots with gold decorations. The eastern development in particular began to acquire a more familiar appearance, with black dots to distinguish letters and short vowels and other orthographic signs in a form readily recognizable today.

The Kufic story is not quite told, for it is necessary to deal briefly with the script and its development used as a tool in inscriptions, be they lapidary − funerary or architectural − or numismatic. The difficulties of nomenclature have already been mentioned and the epigraphic role of Kufic can perhaps be reduced to three important types. By the fifth/eleventh century, foliated Kufic was much in evidence, so called because leaves formed the decoration of the apices of the letters. Floriated Kufic has much the same decoration with the addition of floral motifs growing from the terminations of the letters (Illustration 17). The third type is plaited Kufic, in which the letter shapes are woven or plaited together to form an elaborate, pleasing and usually entirely symmetrical pattern (Illustration 18).

It is time now to turn to naskhi and to remind ourselves that an even greater plethora of different − not to say confusing − technical terms than that mentioned above in the context of Kufic applies also to this script. Once again we must try to clarify and simplify.

It would be wrong to think that naskhi, the cursive “copying” script, developed out of Kufic. We can indeed see the
beginnings of *naskbi* in the papyrus scripts described above and a relatively quick, cursive hand grew along with the angular Kufic from earliest times. The fact that the formal calligraphic *naskbi* which is extant dates mainly from the seventh/thirteenth century and later certainly does not mean that it is a late form. This form of script is the closest to the earlier Nabataean writing.

We do in fact have an excellent example of a simple *naskbi* Quran manuscript dated 391/1000. Both the calligraphy and the illumination were carried out by the famous Ibn al-Bawwab (Illustration 19). One can note that all diacritics and vowel and other orthographic signs are provided in exactly the same form as we know them today. The marginal roundels in lapis lazuli and gold and the striking gold headings make for a pleasingly simple, if somewhat crowded, overall effect. It is possible to see catchwords at the bottom left of the verso of the folio. However, this should not be taken as contemporary with the copying of the manuscript and has clearly been added at a later date.

The technical terms associated with the cursive *naskbi* script are many and apt to confuse. The confusion is compounded by the fact that the term *naskbi*, as well as denoting the cursive genre as a whole, is used for a sub-division of it! The Abbasid vizier, Ibn Muqsla (d. 330/940), is the first name to appear in connection with the teaching of the rules of cursive writing. Ibn al-Nadim, the author of the famous *Fihrist* (compiled c. 377/987), mentions twelve main scripts and a further twelve variations! Here we shall go along with Ibn Muqsla who is famed for the six categories of *naskbi* which he lists and describes: *thulth, naskbi, rayhun, muhaqqaq, tawqi*
and riqa' (singular: ruq'a). Muslim calligraphers regard thulth ("third", perhaps so called because a third of each letter inclines) as the "mother" of this cursive group and naskh as the normal writing and later printing script (Illustration 20). Muhajjaq is principally characterized by the angle of the left corner of certain letters like bā', tā', thā', dāl, dhāl etc. Rayhān is a version of muhajjaq, but differs in that its letters have sharp ends (Illustration 21). Tawqi' is a heavier
22. Riqa\(\text{\textsuperscript{a}}\) (below)

chancellery script with long sweeps between letters and \textit{sin}/\textit{shin} already appearing as a horizontal stroke. \textit{Riqa}\(\text{\textsuperscript{a}}\) has survived to be adapted as a very quick handwriting style to this day (see Chapter VII) (Illustration 22).

VI - The Arabic Scripts beyond the Arab Heartlands — North Africa, Iran and Turkey

The Muslim conquests begun in the first/seventh century spread the message of Islam far and wide. The whole of North Africa became part of the Islamic world. In the late first/early eighth century, a member of the Umayyad family fled to the Iberian peninsula from the increasingly powerful Abbasids in the east. Muslim rule over Spain was to last there until the ninth/fifteenth century. For more than seven hundred years, therefore, Spain was an important part of the Islamic world. Similar Muslim expansion took place from earliest Islamic times in the east, and Iraq, Iran and Central Asia and much of the north of the Indian sub-continent, as well as Turkey under the Ottoman sultans, became Islamic in religion and culture. The Arabic alphabet spread too and it is not surprising over such a vast area of the globe that different regions of the Islamic world produced their own particular styles of the Arabic script. Some of the most important of North Africa, Iran and Turkey are the subject of this chapter.
Let us turn to North Africa and Spain first. The Maghrebi script is the name given to that which predominated in the whole of the area. It is the one cursive script which developed directly out of the Kufic which we have discussed above. The earlier history of the Maghrebi script is something of a mystery, for our prime examples date from the sixth/twelfth century. It should be noted too that parchment continued to be used as a writing material much later in the west than in the east which had begun to use paper from about the fourth/tenth century. A wonderful example of Maghrebi is shown in Illustration 23. Its Kufic origins are immediately obvious. Vowel and other orthographic signs are in a light blue ink in contrast to the gold of the actual letters. Some diacritics unique to the Maghrebi script (which indeed continue to this day in North Africa) should be noted. The qaf has only one dot above the letter (line 2), while the letter fā' carries its dot underneath (line 3). The shapes of some letters are of some interest too. In the ǧimm-alif the tail of the former swings right round in a semi-circle, almost returning to touch the alif. The flat base of the ‘ayn recalls the Kufic, as does the long, horizontal base of the kaf with its parallel second stroke.

Both Iran and Turkey have over the centuries been important centres of Arabic calligraphy, that is displayed in the superb codices of Islam and in the equally fine architecture. For the most part in both countries, the classical Kufic and naskhi scripts described above were employed in their manuscript and architectural works of art. In the late seventh/thirteenth century the centre of calligraphic gravity shifted eastwards from the Baghdad of the Abbasids to eastern centres like Herat, Mashhād, Tabriz and Tehran. The “canonical” six scripts described above were further developed and two important scripts added: ta‘liq and nastaliq, both also occurring in their šikasta (“broken”) form. Ta‘liq (“suspension”) takes its name from the fact that its letters are joined together with words running into each other (Illustration 24). This quick hand with diacritics often missing and sin/sin written as a line without teeth was used from the fifth/eleventh or sixth/twelfth century in books, but also in official government documents. By the eighth/fourteenth century, it was yielding place to the šikasta version. Nastaliq (Illustration 25) was supposedly a combination of ta‘liq and naskhi. It certainly appears a much more formal hand than ta‘liq and goes back probably to the seventh/thirteenth century. What was to develop into the šikasta
24. Ta’liq

25. Nasta’liq
script appeared in the eleventh/seventeenth century. It is a very fine, sweeping script, extremely difficult to read, and is particularly associated with literary works, especially poetry (Illustration 26).

What of Turkey, another important centre of Arabic calligraphy? The Turks too followed the "canonical six" scripts down to the conquest of Constantinople in 857/1453. Istanbul was little by little to become a major centre of the art of calligraphy. The Turks made full use of the classical scripts which have all received attention above. The important addition, the *diwāni* (Illustration 27), is said to have been invented for the diwans created by Mehmed II after the conquest of Constantinople. Attractive to the eye, though difficult to read without a thorough knowledge of the script, *diwāni* has much in common with *riga* which in a sense is a simplified form of it. One final major calligraphic development closely associated with Turkey is the *tughra*, in which calligraphy is used and moulded to form the picture of an object, a ship, a bird etc., or any pleasing shape.
The Arabic alphabet is alive and well and can be commonly found in all Muslim countries throughout the world. Arabic is the official language of twenty-three countries in Africa and the Middle East with a combined population of approximately 325 millions. In addition, approximately one and one half billion people, about one fifth of the world's population, are Muslims who read and actively use the script, at least for the purpose of worship.

A number of languages, totally unrelated to Arabic, yet whose speakers are Muslims, still to this day use the Arabic script. The major example is Persian, an Indo-European language, which from the early days of Islam in the first/seventh century took over the Arabic alphabet, along with many Arabic words, for its own use. A number of Arabic letters are superfluous in Persian, except for Arabic loan words (e.g. the so-called emphatics), and a number were added on, being lacking in Arabic (e.g. /p/, /ch/ etc.). Pashto, the major language of Afghanistan and of many people in Pakistan, also makes use of the Arabic alphabet. We must also mention...
Urdu in this context, the official language of Pakistan and the everyday language of millions in India. Urdu generally uses a form of nastāʿīq (see Chapter VI) and employs also the additional letters required by the language found in the Persian alphabet. Finally, we note that the Somali language is also written in the Arabic script.

Yet another group of languages (once again all of them Muslim in religion and culture) has used the Arabic alphabet in the past, but has now changed to Roman. Turkish is the obvious example. Since at least the eighth/fourteenth century when it came into being, the Ottoman state employed the Arabic alphabet for Ottoman Turkish. In 1928, Kemal Atatürk as part of his modernization policy for Turkey decreed that Turkish would use the Roman alphabet with some adaptations (for example, چ for /ch/, ش for /sh/, the dotless ی and the ก used for the sound /j/). This is the practice to this day. Other languages have now abandoned the Arabic alphabet. The major western African language, Hausa, was traditionally written in an Arabic script called ajami (from the Arabic “foreign”). A Roman alphabet was introduced during British rule in Nigeria and in 1930 the so-called boko (from the English “book”) became the official alphabet. From the eighth/fourteenth century, Malay was written in the Arabic alphabet in Malaya and Indonesia. British and Dutch colonial rule encouraged a change to Roman. As for Swahili, the major language of East Africa, from the eighteenth century the first written examples of the language were produced in the Arabic alphabet. Under colonial pressure in the nineteenth century, the language changed to the Roman alphabet.

The Arabic scripts in their classical forms are still used widely in many forms of artistic decoration: in modern art, in architecture etc., for example, where superb calligraphic work can still be found. Modern art in the Arab world has become Europeanized in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but it is remarkable that the Arabic alphabet, as if recalling past calligraphic glories, often finds a place there. Not surprisingly, it was nastāʿīq that was eventually to provide a printing script in the modern Arab world; well-printed newspapers, magazines and books are written in a neat, pleasing nastāʿīq script, although other scripts are employed too for headlines or headings in general. All printed Arabic, with the exception of Quranic texts which are fully vocalized, appear entirely bereft of vowel and orthographic signs, unless of course there is some linguistic ambiguity. Naturally, printed poetry will show many more signs than prose texts. It perhaps goes without saying that all diacritics, the dots used to distinguish identical letters, are standard in printed Arabic.

It is difficult to be precise about dates, but the system of employing dots to distinguish otherwise identical letters must have begun in the first/seventh century. Vowel and other orthographic markers too must be of early use. Such is the nature of Arabic manuscript writing, right through the medieval period to the nineteenth century in which dots and vowel markers were very frequently ignored, that any attempt at dating the finalization of the use of dots would be rash. The dots, the short vowel markers and other signs such as the suhān (“resting”), a small circle included to indicate that the letter concerned is followed by no vowel at all, and shadda (“strengthening”), a small sin in appearance and actually a shin, to indicate that the letter concerned is doubled, were in all probability only standardized with the advent of Arabic printing. The latter appears first in the tenth/
sixteenth century in Europe and in the Middle East from the seventeenth.

Arabic printing has undergone a tremendous transformation in recent years with the advent of computers. The relevant software can sort out which form of a letter is required and it does this by recognizing what went before and what comes after. It instantly corrects itself so that the correct combination appears on screen and in print.

Arabic handwriting, in common indeed with that in other scripts, has become more and more difficult to read, taking short cuts to achieve speed and convenience. It certainly is the development of the riqā’ script described above. The teeth of letters disappear where possible (e.g. sin/shin) and the letters are merely horizontal strokes. More than one dot is written as a continuous stroke, two dots a short line above (ʔā’ā) or below the letter form (ḥā’ā’). Above the letter thā’, the three dots are written above as a small circumflex accent. Final niin and qaaf tend to lose their dots and, as if in compensation, end with a flourishing tail rather than with a neat semi-circle.

Out of the first century CE Nabataean consonantal alphabet and having added vowel signs and diacritics under the influence of Syriac in the first/seventh century, the Arabic alphabet today serves millions, native speakers and non-Arab Muslims alike.

Illustration Sources

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