Academic University in Cairo Press

Writing Arabic
From Script to Type

Stefan F. Moguen
This book, abundantly illustrated with examples of Arabic handwriting, calligraphy, and typography, clearly presents the development of Arabic writing styles, from the beginning with reed pens to twenty-first-century computerized typesetting. The author explains the importance of writing instruments and the surfaces onto which letters are inscribed, including the particular challenges introduced with the innovation of the printing press, and later the computer.

Writing Arabic will attract not only those interested in the extraordinary history of writing, but also graphic designers, calligraphers, and visual artists, enabling an understanding of the development of existing styles and providing a foundation from which new logotypes and character fonts can be designed.
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Preface

I wrote the first draft of this book in 1983 when I was working in Morocco. My job consisted, among other things, of training draftsmen in Arabic lettering for printing.

I decided then that it would be a good idea to give my students a history of Arabic writing. That was when I discovered, to my surprise, that there were many books on calligraphy, but none of them clearly detailed the evolution of the various types of Arabic script.

Moreover, most authors preferred to discuss the esthetic and decorative aspects of calligraphy without touching on the principal function of writing itself, which is, after all, a vital means for communicating and transmitting knowledge. Lastly, the problems of using Arabic script in printing were never broached at all.

That is why I decided to present the various styles of Arabic writing in historical order of appearance, taking into account the materials and writing instruments that were used, as well as the complex encounter between the written script and printing—and later with computing.

This book is for anyone who is curious about the extraordinary history of writing around the world, but it is also for graphic artists, calligraphers, and plastic artists. I hope it will help them to make the appropriate choices among existing styles and provide them with a logical foundation for the creation of new logos and typefaces.

Stefan F. Moginet
The Origins of the Arabic Alphabet

-3100
-3000
-2900
-2800
-2700
-2600
-2500
-2400
-2300
-2200
-2100
-2000
-1900
-1800
-1700
-1600
-1500
-1400
-1300
-1200
-1100
-1000
-900
-800
-700
-600
-500
-400
-300
-200
-100
0
100
200
300
400
500
600

Proto-Sumerian pictographic system
Cuneiform, Sumerian
Egyptian pictographic system
Cuneiform, Akkadian
Cretan pictographs
Proto-Semitic script
Cretan linear A
Hittite pictographs
Proto-Canaanite script
Phoenician alphabet
Greek alphabet
Aramaic alphabet
South Arabian script
Ancient Hebrew
Hebrew alphabet
Latin alphabet
Nabatean alphabet
Sinaitic alphabet
Arabic alphabet

Beginning of the Hijra

From Imprints to Signs

Hunters have understood the language of animal tracks since the dawn of humanity. The trails left by their prey provided them with a great deal of information that was vital to their survival: the species type, their weight and age, the direction they were going in, how many animals there were, and so on. We can view this as an early form of reading.

By attributing meaning to animal tracks, early humans were conferring sense on their own tracks. By deliberately making prints of their hands or feet, people had invented signs or signatures. They were a mark of ownership, or a symbol. In their own way, these early people were printing, etching and painting evolved over time.

The custom of marking places, objects, and individuals became widespread, using a variety of means such as fingers, pointed or sharp instruments, and colored matter like earth, charcoal, or plant and mineral extracts. By leaving traces, humanity acquired a new form of expression and communication.
Gradually, the desire to represent reality transformed the primitive signs into drawing. Early humans considered the power to create images to be such an extraordinary activity that for a long time it was reserved for magic or religious practices. The first drawings were also the first artificial memories, and have transmitted information to us from those distant ancestors of ours.
The development of pastoral civilizations and the need to count herds and estimate wealth gave rise to the idea of fixing and transmitting information by means of marks and images.

Over time, these images became increasingly standardized and the original drawings evolved into symbol-drawings, or pictographs; but humankind was still a long way from phonetic transcriptions.

Representing a sound (rather than an object) by means of a sign was a gradual process that occurred along with the development of pictographs. The growing number of signs began to form codes that, although complex, transmitted fairly precise information.

By now we can call this writing, a phenomenon that emerged with the development of the first urban civilizations of Mesopotamia. The most ancient systems of writing we have found were used by the Sumerians 3,000 years before our era.

Two factors influenced the development of signs:
- the medium and tracing instrument used, which changed the shapes of the lines;
- the desire to reduce writing movement.

With the use of the clay tablet and stylus, the representational pictographs gradually evolved into abstract signs and formed the cuneiform writing that was to be used by many peoples, including the Elamites, Hittites, Assyrians, and Babylonians, etc.
It was the Egyptians who made the vital discovery of the stylus (a pen made from a sharpened reed), as well as ink and papyrus. It was thanks to papyrus, a very light material, easy to make and transport in Egypt, and which also kept very well, that writing developed in such spectacular fashion. For thousands of years papyrus was the medium on which thought was transcribed.

The smooth surface of the papyrus and the lightness of the reed pen had a considerable impact on the aspect of the writing itself. The shape of the writing became more rounded, and as a result was easier and faster to write. This gave rise to cursive writing styles that looked very different from carved or lapidary writing.

The Egyptians used a pictographic system and progressively added a phonetic dimension. The carvers, sculptors, and painters who transformed buildings into massive books that could be read also used a pictographic form of writing, namely hieroglyphs.

The scribes used cursive hieratic script for administration and official texts, which was similar to hieroglyphs and quite slow to produce. In everyday life they used demotic script, which evolved away from hieroglyphs to become non-figurative signs that allowed the writer to minimize hand movements by using more supple lines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hieroglyph</th>
<th>Hieratic</th>
<th>Demotic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Hieroglyph Image]</td>
<td>![Hieratic Image]</td>
<td>![Demotic Image]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years BCE</th>
<th>2900</th>
<th>2600</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>1500</th>
<th>500</th>
<th>1500</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1300</th>
<th>200</th>
<th>100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Years BCE Image]</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
For centuries, different forms of writing came and went. They were based on pictographic systems that, to varying degrees, were combined with syllabic ones.

The idea of representing sounds with a limited number of signs, the combination of which make it possible to transcribe words and phrases phonetically, is attributed to the Phoenicians.

In this way the alphabet was born, although at this stage it was made up only of consonants.

The stela of Mesha, King of Moab, bears an inscription in Moabite, which is close to ancient Phoenician.

It commemorates his victory over the Kings of Israel (circa 800 BCE).

Phoenician inscription on papyrus (Cyprus, 1000 BCE).
### Comparative Table of the Major Semitic Scripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phoenician</th>
<th>Palestinian</th>
<th>Aramaic</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Syrian</th>
<th>South Arabian</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>𐤀 𐤁 𐤂 𐤃</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Writing in Antiquity

The advantages of the Phoenician script were such that it prevailed over all the others and gave rise to all the major Semitic and European forms of writing, including Canaanite, Aramaic, Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and Latin.

### Some of the precursors of the Arabic script:

- Estrangele (Syria, fifth century).

Aramaic inscription of Barakid at Zinciri (900 BCE).

South Arabian inscription.
Traditional Arabic letters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic Letter</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>أ</td>
<td>alif</td>
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<tr>
<td>ب</td>
<td>ba’</td>
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<td>ت</td>
<td>ta’</td>
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<td>ث</td>
<td>tha’</td>
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<td>za’</td>
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<tr>
<td>س</td>
<td>sa’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ص</td>
<td>shadda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ways of writing the hamza

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Initial (at the beginning of the word)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Medial (in the middle of the word)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Final (at the end of the word)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Isolated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vowel signs
1. fatha (a)
2. kasra (i)
3. damma (o)
4. sukun
5. shadda

The Arabic Alphabet

Arabic writing is read from right to left.
- It is consonantal and the alphabet has 29 consonants (28 plus the hamza).
- Some letters are joined to the preceding or subsequent ones. Some are never joined to the subsequent ones.
- Each letter has between two and four different forms, depending on where it is situated in the word.
  1: initial (at the beginning of the word),
  2: medial (in the middle of the word),
  3: final (at the end of the word),
  4: isolated.
- Vowels are indicated by means of signs placed above or below the consonants.

Certain similarly shaped letters are differentiated by the number of dots placed above or below the letter.

Certain combinations of letters are written in special shapes called ligatures.

The Arabic alphabet does not have capital letters.

Note that the examples and tables in Arabic on the following pages should, of course, be read from right to left.
The Beginnings
of Arabic Writing

The first forms of Arabic writing grew out of the Semitic, Canaanite, Aramaic, and Nabatean writing systems with the emergence of the Arabic language. The letters that emerged around the fifth century (the Zabād inscription, dated 512 CE, or those in Harran from 568 CE and Umm al-Jimal in the sixth century) differed considerably from the Nabatean script. These distinct forms became the script we call North Arabian, because it was used in northeastern Arabia and gradually spread among the Arab tribes who lived in Hira and ‘Anbar, and then Hejaz in Western Arabia.

Oral transmission still dominated during this period, and the use of writing was restricted to a few tombstones or commemorative inscriptions. Any other writing materials that may have been used at the time, such as leather, bone, or wood, have not survived.

The primitive Arabic script was also influenced graphically by Estrangelo, a form of Syriac writing that was in use in the fifth and sixth centuries CE. The oldest Arabic script is called ḥamm, and as it developed it became the writing of all the Arab people.

At that time, every town had a local derivative of ḥamm: ‘anbari in ‘Anbar, hiri in Hira, nakthi in Mecca, and so forth, but they did not differ substantially. There were also three principal styles nusawaq (rounded), nushal-lath (triangular) and ti’m (twinned, meaning a combination of the other two).

Only two styles survived, one supple and cursive, called nusawaq, the other more angular, known as nusanat.
The First Islamic Texts

Graffiti on a rock at Mount Saba, near Medina (circa 625 ce).

After the death of the Prophet, the first concern of the scribes was to provide precise and faithful texts. This respect for the main function of writing, namely to transmit accurate information, would gradually lead to the development of simple and unambiguous styles.

However, there was still little difference between the carved (lapidary) shapes produced on hard materials such as stone, wood, or bone and the writing produced by a reed pen on a smooth medium such as leather, parchment, or papyrus.

Letter showing cursive writing (early seventh century).

Stone inscription (677 ce).

Relief inscription.
Derived from mukarraman, the first Islamic texts used in Mecca and Medina were mainly written in mālī (slanted style), mashq (extended style), and naskh (inscriptional style).

All other Arabic styles developed from the mashq and naskh styles of writing, divided into two groups, the angular and the cursive styles.
After the Islamic conquest, the spread of reading through the Qur’an led to the creation of several seats of learning that required the services of numerous scribes. To ensure the integrity of the texts and the unity of writing, the learned scribes from the city of Kufa in Iraq disseminated and imposed their models of written copies of the Qur’an. These were the basic Kufic models, so by extension, all angular writing came to be called Kufi or Kufic.

Before the second century of the Hijra, the notation system was incomplete. The diacritical dots that made it possible to distinguish signs representing several letters were added by Nasr ibn ‘Asim and Yahya ibn Mansour, and Abu-l-Aswad al-Duwali introduced red dots above or below the consonants to indicate short vowels.

This system was later abandoned in favor of indicating short vowels by means of specific signs called tā’āra’at, a system devised by al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi in the eighth century and still in use today.
With improved techniques for cutting reed pens and the use of smoother, better prepared media such as parchment and vellum, the Kufic script rapidly evolved from its original crude form to become more refined, with contrasting full and slender strokes.

The Eastern Kufic script (Mashreq) looks as though the pen is impatient to break away from its severe geometric constraints to achieve a finer and suppler style of writing.

Copies of the Qur'an were adorned with decorative elements that in no way hindered the reading—on the contrary, they emphasized textual hierarchy by highlighting the titles of the surats and separating the verses. Originally, the introduction of colored inks was less for decorative than practical purposes, red, for instance, signaling short vowels and tā'awwun.

The Maghribi style was the culmination of the contrast between harsh right angles and the cursive tendencies of the reed pen.
During the tenth century in the western part of the Muslim empire, which included North Africa and Spain, the Kufic script became even more rounded and gave way to a truly cursive style known as Maghribi.

While retaining a horizontal line of writing and large perpendicular vertical strokes, the Maghribi style made full use of curves, especially in the last letters of words, which reached down to touch or intertwine with the following words.

These descending curves served to balance out the space between the lines. Note also the curved extremities of the strokes, thanks to the special cut of the reed pen.

There were several local and individual variations of the Maghribi style.
As Arab civilization flourished in the tenth century, a variety of artistic activities developed, including architecture and decoration. Written verses from the Qur’an became a dominant part of mural decoration, both inside and outside.

The stonemason’s chisel accentuated the geometrical shapes of the Kufic style. The technical constraints of triangular cuts at the extremities of vertical strokes (the equivalent of serifs in Latin letters) were transformed into variable decorative elements, not only in engraved or carved texts, but also in calligraphic ones.

The development of decorative endings.

Carved Kufic letters.

Calligraphic Kufic letters.
Lapidary Kufic

Classic Kufic (Iraq, twelfth century).

Classic Kufic with flouriated endings (Fatimid Dynasty).
Carved Kufic with intertwined endings (Iraq, twelfth century).

Carved Kufic (Iraq, twelfth century).
Lapidary Kufic

Carved Kufic (Iraq, 1102).

Carved Kufic (Egypt, tenth century).

Engraved Kufic (Egypt, 966 CE).

Classic woven Kufic (Persia, tenth century).
After this period of balanced classicism there followed one in which writing was fully exploited for decorative purposes, even to the extent of overloading, in a style that could almost be described as baroque. Nevertheless, despite the abundance of decoration, most of the time the writing remained very legible.

Some of the countless variations of Kufic decorative endings.