The inscription of Zuhayr, the oldest Islamic inscription (24 AH/AD 644–645), the rise of the Arabic script and the nature of the early Islamic state

This article provides an edition, translation and analysis of an inscription dated 24 AH (644 AD) discovered recently in north-west Saudi Arabia. It is an immensely important find, since it is our earliest dated Arabic inscription; it apparently contains a reference to the caliph ‘Umar I and shows evidence of a fully-fledged system of diacritical marks. The latter aspect is of great significance for our understanding of the development of the Arabic script and of the writing down of Arabic texts, especially the Qur’an. The text is compared with others composed in the decades shortly before and after the rise of Islam.

Keywords: Arabic inscriptions, Arabic script, Qur’an, rise of Islam, ‘Umar I

Introduction [339]
In the summer of the year 1420/1999 the author accompanied his wife Hayat bint ‘Abdallah al-Kilabi on her field trip to collect material for her doctoral thesis which she was preparing on the early Islamic inscriptions located on the Syrian pilgrimage road. In the course of their work in the region lying between al-‘Ula and al-Hijr (Mada’in Salih) (Fig. 1), the inscription that forms the subject of this study was discovered. There was much excitement upon reading the text, since its importance was immediately evident from its content and date of composition (year 24 AH).

At once our efforts were concentrated on photographing and transcribing the inscription and on scaling the high rocky face overlooking it in order to take the necessary measurements. It was important also to verify the authenticity of the writing and to confirm that the colour of the incised parts of the rock was the same for all letters, that there were no additions to the original writing and in particular that the dots found on some of the letters were original. Indeed, the author worked as hard on the inscription that we have named ‘the inscription of Zuhayr’ as did its originator! Subsequently, a survey of the other inscriptions in the vicinity was conducted in order to elucidate their relationship with the text under discussion here. In the same area another inscription was discovered that was executed in the same script; it began with the word ‘I’ and bore the name of Zuhayr, here linked with his patroness Ibnat Shayba, but not dated.

1 Originally published in Arabic as Ghabban, ‘A ibn I. Naqsh Zuhayr: aqdam naqsh islami, mu’arrakh bi-sanat 24 AH/644–5 AD. Arabia: Revue de Sabe´oliege 1 (2003): 339–293 (these page numbers are noted in square brackets throughout the translation). Because of the importance of the Zuhayr inscription, ‘Ali Ghabban and I felt that this article should be made more widely available, and hence my translation of it. We are grateful to Prof. Dan Potts for agreeing to publish it, for providing a map and for helping with the copy-editing.

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This article will undertake a study of the inscription of Zuhayr, with a focus on its location, its relation to the Syrian pilgrimage route, its content and form, its date, the characters and events that feature in it, its significance for the history of Muslim Arabic epigraphy, its script and, finally, its similarity to published inscriptions from the same period. For the publication of this inscription in an independent study, the author did, of course, obtain the agreement of his companion on the field trip!

The site of the inscription and its relation to the Syrian pilgrimage road [338] (Fig. 1)
The inscription of Zuhayr lies in the region of Qa’ al-Mu’tadil at a distance of 17 km south of al-Hijr; more precisely, near the place of the intersection of the eastern road going up from al-Mabiyyat by Qa’ al-Mu’tadil. The road that the inscription is found on is known as the Abu Zurayba pilgrimage road, where Zurayba means the pile of stones placed on a road to mark its route. Many such piles are located on this road and it is considered to be one of the two routes of the Syrian pilgrimage road between Qarḥ and al-Hijr:

1. The eastern road, i.e. the Abu Zurayba pilgrimage road, which begins from Qarḥ (al-Mabiyyat), goes past Qa’ Ramm and then enters a plain surrounded by mountains until it finally reaches Qa’ al-Mu’tadil before going on to al-Hijr.
2. We may call this the middle road or the ‘Udhayb road. It crosses Qa’ Ramm after leaving Qarḥ (al-Mabiyyat) and then follows the principal course of the Wadi al-Qura until it reaches the oasis of al-‘Ula. After that it heads north to al-Hijr past al-‘Udhayb.

It seems that the first route, the Abu Zurayba pilgrimage road, on which the inscription of Zuhayr is located, is the oldest one. Pilgrims and travellers during the early Islamic period used the portion of the road lying between Qarḥ (the principal settlement in Wadi al-Qura) and al-Hijr, where there are a host of undated inscriptions that might plausibly be assigned to the first century AH and a few that are explicitly dated to that century. This route is also the shortest, because it follows a direct road between Qarḥ and al-Hijr without going past al-‘Ula. It was possibly the most used route at the beginning of the first century AH before the expansion of settlement in the oasis of al-‘Ula and the increase in agricultural activity there, which was accompanied by exploitation of its old springs and water canals and the creation of new ones and which

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2 Al-Qa’ means low-lying land into which the flood waters of the surrounding wadis empty. Qa’ al-Mu’tadil is an expansive spot which is crossed by the two routes of the Syrian pilgrimage road between al-‘Ula and al-Hijr, namely, the route that the Zuhayr inscription is found on and the middle route that follows the valley of al-‘Ula. The researcher presents his thanks to Dr Hussein ibn ‘Ali Abu al-Hasan, a native of the region of the inscription and a specialist in its archaeology and history, for the information and assistance which he offered the researcher.

3 Dr Hayat al-Kilabi is undertaking a study of these inscriptions and it is hoped they will appear in the published version of her doctorate.
subsequently made it a major stop along the road between Qarḥ and al-Hijr. Most pilgrims and travellers were eager to visit it and a number of those who followed the direct eastern road now changed their course. The distance of the direct road between Qarḥ (al-Mabiyyat) and al-Hijr is 37 km, approximately a single stage, and so it was possible to cover it at one stretch without the need to stop off in the middle; and it would appear that this eastern road continued to be used after the first century.

[337] The existence of the inscription of Zuhayr on the route of the Abu Zurayba pilgrimage, dated to year 24 AH, makes it more likely that this course was the oldest one in use between Qarḥ and al-Hijr. Whether Zuhayr was one of the pilgrims or an inhabitant of the region, he was travelling along the road in that year, perhaps on a journey within the Hijaz or making his way to Syria or Egypt or returning from there.⁶

**Description of the inscription (Figs 2–5)**
The inscription of Zuhayr was made on a sandstone rock face several metres above ground level and is located on the right side of the road as one heads north. The inscription occupies the highest portion of the rock face, which is one indication that it was the first of the inscriptions made on it; right next to it there are three other inscriptions.

The inscription consists of three lines of unequal length — the first is 50 cm in length, the second 215 cm and the third 54 cm; the dimensions of the surface area of the writing are 215 × 50 cm. It was made by means of surface incisions. The average length of its alifs and lams amounts to 14 cm and the breadth of the incisions of its letters is 2.50 cm. There is an observable proportionality in the distances between the letters of the words and between the words themselves.

As regards the arrangement of the inscription, Zuhayr kept the basmala apart on a separate line. It would seem that he planned to do the rest of the inscription on one line, except for the word ‘twenty’, which is the last word in the text and which did not quite fit on the line. He therefore put it on a third line and aligned it with the first line, with about the same length, in an attempt to harmonize the shape of the text.

**The reading of the inscription (Fig. 5)**
1. In the name of God
2. I, Zuhayr, wrote (this) at the time 'Umar died, year four
3. And twenty

**The wording of the inscription [336]**
This inscription is considered to belong to the category known as commemorative inscriptions, i.e. texts recorded by travellers along roads as a commemoration of their passing along them or of the places they passed through.

1. بسم الله
2. آنا زهير كتبت زمن عمر سنة أربع
3. وعشرين

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⁴ The oldest reference in the Islamic sources to al-'Ula as a settlement on this road comes in the report about the places that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) passed on his way to Tabuk. Thus Yaqut mentions that Muḥammad (pbuh) passed al-'Ula and prayed there and that subsequently a mosque was built on the site where he prayed (1979, 4: 144). Al-'Ula is also referred to as a settlement on this road by al-Tabari amid the events of year 13 (1977, 7: 398–399). For more information see Nāṣif 1416/1995: 45–46.

⁵ Qarḥ lies within the archaeological site of al-Mabiyyat; for a determination of the exact location of the site of Qarḥ see Nāṣif 1416/1995: 27–30.

⁶ The road to Syria definitely ran past the location of the inscription. As for the road to Egypt, the author thinks that it only branched off from the Syrian road at Qarḥ after the death of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.
their sojourn at one of the way stations. Commemorative rock inscriptions, which some call graffiti, are of many types: some of them comprise, together with the name of their owner, a plea for forgiveness, a declaration of faith in God or of devotion to him, an affirmation of trust in God, a request for paradise, a seeking of refuge in God from hell, a profession of belief in the oneness of God and Muhammad’s prophethood, an exhortation to Muslims and passers-by to piety and obedience or other types of entreaty, some of which might correspond to the seal text that the owner of the inscription wears on his/her signet ring and uses for sealing documents (Ghabban 2000: 239). Other inscriptions constitute a record of their author’s passing along the road or stopping at one of its way stations in a very direct manner: so-and-so passed by or so and-so halted at this spot, or I am so and-so. The latter phrasing implies that its owner passed the place or lodged at it; it may or may not be prefixed by the first-person pronoun ‘I’ and occasionally it concludes with the formula: ‘it was written at the year such-and-such’, as is the case in the inscription of Zuhayr, in which the first-person pronoun appears together with the name Zuhayr, and it ends with the dating formula.

It seems that this latter form of commemoration is one of the oldest used in Islamic Arabic inscriptions, and also in pre-Islamic ones, in that it often features in inscriptions made along roads in Ancient North Arabian scripts.7 Exactly the same form was used in some of the principal Arabic inscriptions dating to shortly before Islam, such as the inscription of Harran (Figs 6–8), dated AD 568 (al-‘Ushsh 1973: 74–5).8

The content of the inscription
The inscription contains three sentences. The first represents the opening of the text, namely the incomplete basmala, ‘In the name of God’. The second sentence is reserved for the mention of the name of the owner of the inscription and its executor, who was content just to note his first name, Zuhayr, preceded by the first-person pronoun ‘I’. As for the third sentence it comprises the dating formula and consists of two parts: the first, ‘it was written at the time ‘Umar died’, dates the inscription to the event of the death of ‘Umar (may God be pleased with him), while the second part, ‘in the year twenty-four’, evidently gives the Hijri date.

The use of the incomplete basmala in the opening of the inscription is considered one of the indications of the authenticity of its date, since the basmala that

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7 For more information see Al-Theeb 1421/2000a: nos 86, 146, 162; 1421/2000b: nos 3, 38. The first-person pronoun appears in the form ‘n’ in Palmyrene, Hatran, Mandaean and Syriac script; it is written ‘nh’ in the forms of Aramaic script known as Nabataean, Ancient, Imperial and Palestinian; and it is written ‘n’, without final alif or ha’, in Thamudic, Safaitic, Sabaic and Lihyanite script. For more parallels for the use of the first-person pronoun in other Semitic scripts see Al-Theeb 1421/2000c.

8 Note also that the form of the Islamic Arabic inscriptions beginning with ‘I’ appears often in inscriptions of Mount Sala’ by Medina, which have been published by Hamidullah (1939: 429–434), and Al-Rashid (1416/1995: 179).
is added to some Sasanian dirhams in the reign of [335] ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, ‘Uthman and of some of the Umayyad caliphs is limited to the incomplete version. It was also used in the first fully Arabised coins, starting with the coins of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, the minting of which began in year 77 AH for the gold dinars and 78 AH for the silver dirhams (Riyadh, Museum of Coinage 1416: 36, coin nos 10, 12).

The name of the owner of the inscription, Zuhayr, is limited to the first name, which causes some surprise in view of Zuhayr’s patent concern for documentation, evidenced by his dating of his inscription in two ways: by a famous event and by a written date. It is possible that he made this inscription after the other inscription, near ground level, which includes his name linked to his patroness, Ibnat Shayba, but which he did not date (Figs 9–10). The high rock face then drew his attention, as any text written on it would be clear to every wayfarer, and so he decided to write a second commemorative inscription, in which he mentioned only his first name and took care to date it. Perhaps he did not cite his full name on the second inscription because of the length of the sentence recording the date, since inscribing on stone is not an easy matter, although the whole rock face was empty around it and all parts of it were good for writing on.

Discussion of the date of the inscription
One might consider the first part of the dating formula, ‘it was written at the time ‘Umar died’, as another indication of the authenticity of the inscription, of the correctness of its date and a refutation of the assumption that its author neglected to add a number of hundreds after the ‘twenty’ in the second part of the dating formula, ‘year twenty-four’ — as was done in later times when the word ‘one thousand’ was omitted after the hundreds in the writing of the date — because the death date of the most famous person to bear the name of ‘Umar at that period, i.e. the rightly guided caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, does indeed fall at the end of year 23 or the beginning of year 24. Moreover, the use of the word ‘died’ by the author of the inscription confirms that the ‘Umar mentioned is ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, who was stabbed and did not die immediately but survived for a few days before he died. This is the version of events reported in a number of the sources that relate the death of ‘Umar. The ‘year twenty-four’ in the text allows for two interpretations: one is the year of the death of ‘Umar and the other is the year of the writing of the inscription.

[334] The first part of the dating formula, ‘it was written at the time ‘Umar died’, may be considered the most important portion of the text of the inscription, and indeed, if it had not appeared in the text, the inscription would have lost a major aspect of its historical importance, for every word in

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9 Suhayla Yasin al-Jabburi discovered Sasanian-style dirhams on which was written ‘in the name of God’ and which were struck in the reign of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭab and ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affān (1977: 98–9). Al-Baladhuri mentions that al-Hajjaj struck mule dirhams in the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik on which was written ‘in the name of God’ (Al-Karmali [n.d.]: 13); al-Karmali refers to a coin struck in Tabaristan in year 28 AH, on the rim of which was written ‘in the name of God my Lord’ (ibid. 92).

10 The full basmāla, ‘in the name of God the merciful the compassionate’, appears in the papyrus of Ahnas dated to the year 22 AH (pl. 8A), and on Umayyad coins: on a half-dinar and a third-dinar (Riyadh, Museum of Coinage 1416: 44, coin no. 24 = Umayyad third-dinar struck in year 94 AH, and coin no. 27 = Umayyad half-dinar struck in year 96 AH).
this section is of significant import. The verb ‘it was written’ confirms that the owner, Zuhayr, wrote the inscription, and it wasn’t written for him. The word ‘time’ refers to the event of the death of ‘Umar. The verb ‘died’ confirms that ‘Umar, the next word, is the rightly guided caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭtab, and the name ‘Umar corroborates the accuracy of the Hijri date ‘year twenty-four’ that follows. The second part of the dating formula, ‘year twenty-four’, is also very important, for it helps to clarify the identity of ‘Umar and fixes the date of the writing of the inscription to a specific year.

The question that leaps to mind is why did Zuhayr take the trouble to add this sentence to the text of his inscription? One possible answer is that he witnessed the event of the stabbing of ‘Umar and his death for himself in Medina and was very greatly affected by it, or one of those who witnessed it informed him of it and it stuck in his mind. He therefore alluded to it in his commemorative writing, which he apparently accomplished only a few days after the occurrence of that event.

Dating by important events is a well-known phenomenon among the Arabs since antiquity; a famous example of it is the year of the elephant [AD 570, to which the birth of Muhammad (pbuh) is traditionally dated, RGH]. There are also instances of combined dating of inscriptions, by event and year, from the period before the rise of Islam, such as the inscription of Harran (Figs 6–8), which is dated by the Nabataean date and by the event of the destruction of Khaybar (Al-‘Ushsh 1973: 74–75).

This custom continued in the Islamic period, and one can say that it did not stop in oral history until the recent past. It remains for the author to point out that the use of Hijra dating began, most likely, during the reign of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭtab in year 16 of the Hijra, or some say year 17,12 and that any Islamic document bearing a Hijra date before this year is, in all probability, not authentic.13

The personalities figuring in the inscription [333]

Two names of personalities figure in this inscription: Zuhayr and ‘Umar, and both appear as isolated names. As regards Zuhayr, it seems likely to this author that, as mentioned above, it is the same character that features in the other Zuhayr inscription, which is near the Zuhayr inscription that forms the subject of this study, on the basis of the similarity of the shape of the letters, in particular the two words ‘I am Zuhayr’ (ana Zuhayr). The text of the other inscription is undated and the name Zuhayr appears in it as follows (Figs 9–10): ‘I am Zuhayr, client of Ibnat (sic) Shayba’.

The author did not find an entry for a Zuhayr ‘client of Ibnat Shayba’ in the sources that he was able to consult, although the sources do refer to a number of persons who lived in this period and bore the name of Zuhayr, such as Zuhayr al-Khaṭ‘ami, whom Mu‘awiya sent to ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭtab with news of the conquest of Caesarea in year 18 (Al-Ya’qubi 1988, 2: 151), the Companion Zuhayr ibn Qays al-Balawi, Zuhayr ibn Rafi‘ al-Anṣari, who was one of the parties to the agreement at ‘Aqaba, Zuhayr ibn Qardam al-‘Ujayl, who was a man from Mahra sent on a mission to the Prophet (pbuh), Zuhayr ibn Ṣurad, who headed the mission of Hawazin to the Prophet (pbuh), although none of these were clients (Ibn Sa‘d [n.d.], 1: 355–356; 2: 153; 4: 36; 7: 499; index: 73). There is also Zuhayr ibn al-Qayn, from whom al-Sha‘bi transmitted narratives. Al-Sha‘bi was from the generation after the Prophet (pbuh), who witnessed ‘Ali ibn Abi Ḥaṣan (may God be pleased with him) and wrote about him, and thus Zuhayr ibn al-Qayn may have been of the same generation as the Prophet (pbuh). Moreover, the expression al-Qayn, the blacksmith, is applied to artisans or slaves, so it would seem that Zuhayr ibn al-Qayn was a client (al-Ya’qubi 1988, 2: 244; Ibn Sa‘d [n.d.], 6: 247).

The sources also indicate a number of women who bore the agnomen Ibnat Shayba and lived at the beginning of the first century of the Hijra, some Companions of the Prophet (pbuh) and some not. Among these women are: Ramla ibnat Shayba, a Companion whom ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan married and who bore him ‘A’isha, Umm Aban and Umm ‘Amr, the daughters of ‘Uthman, and who had a famous client named ‘Abdallah ibn Dhakwan Abu I-Zanad (Ibn Sa‘d [n.d.], 8: 239); Fatima ibnata Shayba ibn

For more information on the use of Hijra dating in the reign of ‘Umar see Al-Nawawi, 1996: 47; Al-Biruni, 1923: 29; Furayha, 1988: 57–58.

One such document is in the monastery of St Katherine’s in Sinai; it claims to be a covenant from the messenger of God, may God pray for him and grant him peace, to the monks of the monastery and to the Christians and is dated to the second, or eighth, year of the Hijra (Shaqir 1411/1991: 495–499).
Rabi’a, wife of ‘Uqayl ibn Abi Ṭalib;¹⁴ Şafiya ibnat Shayba ibn ‘Uthman al-Qurashi (Ibn Abi Ḥatim 1952: 348); and Ibnta Shayba ibn Jubayr, also called Umm al-Hamid (Ibn Bashkawal 1407: 262). The patron of Zuhayr may or may not be one of these women.

¹⁴ It is also said that the wife of ‘Uqayl was Fatima bint ‘Utba, sister of Hind (al-‘Asqalani 1398/1987, 4: 382).

[332] The title ‘client’ (mawla) has many meanings: slave, manumitted, manumitter or a relative such as a cousin or nephew. It may also mean ally, as the ally is a client in that he is bound to you so that he derives strength and protection from your power (Ibn Manzur 1988: 201–203), and often one who has fallen into bondage remains affiliated to his patron who manumitted him. ‘Client’ in the phrase that appears in the other inscription of Zuhayr most likely signifies a slave or manumitted client.

The name ‘Umar is the second name to feature in this inscription and, as the author has made clear, the rightly guided caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, must be intended as he is the most famous person to bear this name. It is worth discussing the date of his death here, since the inscription of Zuhayr can be understood to imply a death date in year 24. The sources do not agree on the date of ‘Umar’s death. Ibn Shabba, in his history of Medina, relates an account attributed to Muhammad ibn Sa’d that says: ‘‘Umar was stabbed on Wednesday four days before the end of Dhu l-Hijja, year twenty-three; he was buried on Sunday, on the full moon of Muḥarram, year twenty-four; his caliphate lasted thirteen years, five months and twenty-one days’. Ibn Shabba adds: ‘‘Uthman ibn Muhammad al-Ahmas said: ‘‘This is erroneous; ‘Umar died four days before the end of Dhu l-Hijja; allegiance was pledged to ‘Uthman on Monday, one night before the end of Dhu l-Hijja’’’ (Ibn Shabba [n.d.], 3: 943–944). Sources give other accounts of the death of ‘Umar (Ibn Sa’d [n.d.], 3: 63; al-Ṭabarī 1977, 4: 190–194), but all may be grouped into two versions:

a) ‘‘Umar was stabbed four days before the end of Dhu l-Hijja, year 23, survived for three days and then died; he was buried on the new moon of Muḥarram, year 24; ‘Uthman was appointed caliph three days into Muḥarram, year 24.

b) ‘‘Umar was stabbed six or seven days before the end of Dhu l-Hijja, year 23, and died four days before the end of Dhu l-Hijja. The members of the elective council (shura) assembled three days after his death; allegiance was pledged to ‘Uthman one day before the end of Dhu l-Hijja, year 23, and he was received into the caliphate on the first of Muḥarram, year 24.

The point of contention is, did the death of ‘Umar fall in the beginning of Muḥarram, year 24, or on the 26th of Dhu l-Hijja, year 23? The inscription of Zuhayr could be taken as establishing the date of ‘Umar’s death as year 24. But should the inscription serve as the basis for one of the views cited in the historical sources, especially [331] as these sources were set down in writing more than a century after the event, whereas the inscription was recorded a few days after its occurrence? Or does the sentence ‘it was written at the time ‘Umar died, year twenty-four’ determine only the time of the writing of the inscription? This would have to be in year 24, assuming that Zuhayr was in Medina when ‘Umar was stabbed and left after his death and after ‘Uthman was acknowledged as caliph on 1st or 3rd of Muḥarram, year 24, according to the two aforementioned versions of events. He would have spent five days at least getting to the site of the inscription or maybe more. The author is of the opinion that the matter allows for both possibilities.

The inscription’s significance
The importance of Zuhayr’s inscription for the study of the development of the Arabic script is evident from a number of perspectives:

1. It is dated to year 24 of the Hijra. This date had not featured before in any Muslim Arabic inscriptions, and it is in fact the earliest dated Islamic inscription discovered so far. The inscription of Aswan (Figs 11–12), in Egypt, dated to year 31 of the Hijra, was the oldest dated Islamic inscription until the discovery of the Zuhayr inscription.¹⁵ The

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning here the Cyprus inscription, the tombstone of a certain ‘Urwa ibn Thabit found on the wall of a church and dated to year 29 AH. [However, we know of it only from the description of al-Harawi, who went to Cyprus c. 1180, RGH]. It has not been published nor apparently located as yet. For all that is known about it see Combe, Sauvaget & Wiet 1931, 1: 5–6; El-Hawary, 1930: 321–333; this inscription is also referred to in a number of later sources.
inscription of al-Batha (Figs 13–14), located between Mecca and Ta’if, was the oldest dated Muslim Arabic inscription (40 AH) from Saudi Arabia before the discovery of the Zuhayr inscription (Sharafaddin 1397/1977: 73–74, pl. 49). Next in line are the inscriptions of ‘Abdallah ibn Dayram from Wadi Sabil by Najran (Figs 15–16), dated 46 AH (Grohmann 1962: 124, inscr. Z202, pl. 23), the inscription of al-Khashna, on the Zubayda pilgrimage road near Mecca (Figs 17–18), dated 52 AH (Sharafaddin 1397/1977: 73–74, pl. 50), and the inscription of Mu’awiya on the Swaysad dam at al-Ta’if (Figs 19–20), dated 58 AH (Miles 1948: 236–237, pl. 17a). Next come a series of inscriptions discovered in Saudi Arabia and outside it, dated to the subsequent years of the first century of the Hijra.17

2. It is the second oldest dated Islamic written document discovered so far, the oldest being the papyrus of Ahnas (Figs 21–22), dated 22 AH, therefore two years older than the Zuhayr inscription.18 The papyrus of Ahnas is a receipt on

Fig. 11.
Tracing of the Aswan inscription in Egypt.

Fig. 12.
Reading of the Aswan inscription.

Fig. 13.
Tracing of the al-Batha inscription between Mecca and Ta’if.

16 Sharafaddin read the date of the inscription as 56 AH, but the correct reading is 52 AH. See Fahmi 1407/1987: 346–347, 361.

17 E.g. the inscription of Ḥafnat al-Abyad, dated 64 AH; the inscription of al-‘Abbasa, 71 AH; the foundation text of the Dome of the Rock, 72 AH; two inscriptions from Mecca in the name of ‘Uthman, both dated 80 AH; the inscriptions of Maymun, ‘Afir and Makhlad from the Syrian pilgrimage road, dated 80, 83 and 91 AH respectively; and an inscription from Rawawa dated 100 AH. See the table of these inscriptions in al-Rashid 1413/1992: 267–268; al-Rashid 1995; Hawary 1932: 289–293.

18 Noteworthy also are two Sasanian-style dirhams from the reign of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, struck in year 20 AH, each inscribed with the phrase ‘in the name of God’. They are considered the oldest coins bearing Arabic legends; one was struck in Sijistan and the other in Nahr Tiri, and they are kept in the Iraqi Museum under the numbers 4072–3: al-Jabburi 1977: 98.
Fig. 17. Tracing of the al-Khashna inscription from the Zubayda pilgrimage road near Mecca.

Fig. 18. Reading of the al-Khashna inscription.

Fig. 14. Reading of the al-Batha inscription.

Fig. 15. Tracing of the Wadi Sabil inscription near Najran.

Fig. 16. Reading of the Wadi Sabil inscription.

Fig. 19. Tracing of the Mu’awiyah dam inscription at al-Ta’if.
papyrus drafted by the commander of a detachment of Muslims for the people of Ahnas in Egypt; it speaks of the handing over of sixty-five sheep by them and is written in two languages, Arabic and Greek. [330] It was found in 1877 in Egypt and is now kept in the Vienna National Library (Reiner collection, no. 557).19

3. It has diacritical marks on a number of its letters, i.e. dots which distinguish between letters of the same form. Diacritical marks also appear on the Ahnas papyrus of 22 AH, which constitutes the earliest attestation of them on papyrus. Their appearance on the Zuhayr inscription may be considered the oldest epigraphic attestation and the second oldest on a dated document from the early Islamic period. Previously the Mu’awiya dam inscription at al-Ta’if of 58 AH had been the best-known dotted Islamic Arabic inscription, containing seventeen dotted letters, compared with the ‘Abdallah ibn Dayram inscription from Wadi Sabil, Najran, which only has one dotted letter (the ‘b’ of the word ‘forty’/arba’in). This inscription is older than the Mu’awiya one, dated 46 AH, but is less well known (Figs 15–16). After these two inscriptions is that of Ḥafnat al-Abyad near Karbala, dated 64 AH and comprising five dotted letters (Figs 25–26).20

The marks that accompany the Arabic script are of two types: marks to indicate grammatical inflections, namely vowel marks (al-shakl), and diacritical marks [to distinguish letters of identical form from one another, RGH]. Some modern historians of Islamic civilisation say that the Arabic script was originally devoid of such marks and that the entry of non-Arabs into Islam caused the spread of solecisms, sparking fear for the purity of the Qur’an and the Arabic language. Vowel marks were therefore introduced, first to copies of Qur’ans, and took the form of one or two marks, in a dye different to the colour of the ink, placed above, below or within the letters of the word; vowel-less letters were left without marks. These marks indicate the short vowels ‘a’ (fatḥa), ‘i’ (kāsra) and ‘u’ (ḍammah) and the indefinite case endings (tanwīn).21 Abū l-Aswad al-Du’ali is attributed with undertaking this at the request of the governor of Basra, Ziyād ibn Abihi, in c. year 67 AH; some call this measure the first reform of the script (al-Kurdi 1402/1982: 85–86).22

As regards the diacritical marks, which are the important ones for this study, the general view among most modern historians is that they were introduced in the time of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan by Naṣr ibn ‘Aṣim al-Laythi and Yahya ibn Ya’mar al-Udwani on the order of al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi when copying errors multiplied in Iraq. Al-Hajjaj asked the two men to insert signs to distinguish letters identical to one another. Accordingly, they placed dots on the identical letters, singly and in pairs, in the colour of the ink of the letters, and arranged the identical letters next to one another in the alphabet, contrary to [329] the old alphabetical arrangement. These measures are considered to constitute the second reform of the script (Ḥamūda [n.d.]: 50–51).23

There are those who dispute that Arabic letters would have been devoid of diacritical marks until the time of inserting such marks in Qur’ans. Some scholars investigating this matter object, submitting the view for discussion and study that, ‘adding

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19 This papyrus was published for the first time in an exhibition catalogue of Vienna in 1894, numbered 558; Adolf Grohmann published it in From the World of Arabic Papyri (1952: 62). Since then it has appeared in numerous studies treating the rise of the Arabic script.

20 This inscription was published for the first time by ‘Īzz al-dīn al-Sanḍuq in the journal Sumer (1995: 213–217), then in numerous studies after that.


22 For the account of Abu l-Aswad al-Du’ali’s marking of the Qur’an see al-Dani 1978: 129.

23 See also the account of the adding of diacritical marks to Qur’ans in the time of al-Hajjaj in al-‘Askari 1908, 1: 9–10.
diacritical marks is an activity that came after the writing down in the case of the Arabs, and they have examined the thoughts of the early authorities (al-salaf) about this subject and established what they meant (Al-Asad 1982: 34–41). It is possible to summarise these thoughts as follows:

A) Some early authorities think that diacritical marks were used in the pre-Islamic period and cite proofs from pre-Islamic poetry in which there appears the term al-raqsh, meaning (for them) “marks”. An example is the line of Tarafa ibn al-'Abd: ‘Like the lines of parchment which a scribe raqasha at forenoon’. Al-Shantamari (d. 476 AH) comments on the line as follows: ‘(The poet) likens the remains of the residence to lines of writing, and the meaning of raqashahu is adorned it and beautified it with marks’ (Ibn ‘Abd 1975: 74). And Abu ‘Ali al-Qali (d. 356 AH) said: ‘To put raqsh on the writing is when you write something and add marks to it’ (al-Qali [n.d.], 2: 246).

Ibn al-Nadim in his Bibliographical Compendium quotes a report attributed to Ibn ‘Abbas which specifies that ‘the first to compose in Arabic script were three men from the tribe of Bawlan who lived in al-Anbar, namely Muramir ibn Murra.

Aslam ibn Sidra and ‘Amir ibn Jadra. Muramir instituted the forms, Aslam established the separations and links between letters, and ‘Amir devised the diacritical marks (Ibn al-Nadim 1398/1978: 6–7). Although this tradition has been transmitted with legendary elements, it nevertheless suggests that diacritical marks were established along with the origins of the script.

Al-Qalqashandi records this same report related by Ibn al-Nadim, and adds to it the statement: ‘The conclusion from this is that diacritical marks were invented at the same time as the script’. Then he adduces the account about Abu l-Aswad al-Du’ali being the first to add marks to Qur’ans and to formalise classical Arabic and makes the comment: ‘What has been said before must be the case, since it is improbable that the letters before that, given the identicalness of their forms, were free of marks until the Qur’an was given marks’ (al-Qalqashandi [n.d.], 3: 151).
B) Some early authorities transmit reports about people's knowledge during the time of the messenger of God and his rightly guided successors of diacritical marks. For example [328]:

- It is related from the messenger of God that he said: 'If you disagree about the ya' and the ta', then write it as a ya'...'(Ibn al-Athir [n.d.], 1: 193, entry on Bashir ibn al-Ḩarīth al-Anṣāri)
- Al-Farra' (d. 207 AH) relates a report going back to Zayd ibn Thabit: 'I wrote on a stone nunšīruha and lam yatasanna. I looked to Zayd ibn Thabit and he put dots on the shin and the zay, four in all, and he wrote yatasanna with a ha'” [The reference is to Qur'an 2.259, which contains the words nunshizuha and lam yatasannah; the former word is ambiguous, so Zayd added dots to make it clear, RGH] (al-Farra’ 1955, 1: 172–173).
- It is related on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas that he said: ‘Everything has its light and the light of writing is diacritical marks’ (al-Qalqashandi [n.d.], 3: 153).
- It is related on the authority of ‘Ubayd ibn Aws al-Ghassani, the scribe of Mu’awiya, that he said: 'I wrote a letter in the presence of Mu’awwiya and he said to me: "'Ubayd, embellish (urqush) your letter”', for I once wrote in the presence of the messenger of God and he told me, “Mu’awwiya, embellish your writing”. ‘Ubayd said: “And what does it mean to embellish it, commander of the faithful?” He replied: “Give to each letter the marks that fall to it”’ (Hamidullah 1964: 26; al-Jabburi S 1977: 156).

C) Some of the early authorities adduce reasons for the stripping of marks from Qur’ans, as in the following:

- Abu Bakr ibn ‘Arabi (d. 543 AH) said: ‘The Qur’an texts (al-maṣāḥif) were written and ‘Uthman dispatched them to the far horizons; the texts were original (asl) and the reading an authoritative transmission (riwaya). The Companions of Muhammad (pbb) taught the succeeding generation how to read the Qur’an, and the copying of the Qur’an to the transcripts (nusakh) of it was done according to the way they used to write it for the messenger of God — the writing of ‘Uthman, Zayd, Ubayy and others, without dots or vocalisation. They used this method of transcription so that the original Qur’an text would be preserved by people while still allowing for a measure of difference in vocalisation...’ (Ibn al-‘Arabi 1927, 2: 196–197).
- Ibn al-Jazari said: ‘When the Companions wrote those Qur’ans, they stripped them of dots and vowel marks so that it might have the capacity to bear what might genuinely be from the Prophet (pbb) that wasn’t in the final version. They removed the dots and vowel marks from the Qur’ans just so that the script would be the sole indication of each of the copied, heard and recited wordings in the same way as the wording would be the sole indication of each of the perceived and understood meanings, for the Companions received from the Messenger of God the Qur’an that God had ordered to be conveyed to them, its wording and its meaning together. They didn’t omit anything from the Qur’an confirmed by Muḥammad (pbb) and they didn’t cease to recite it’ (al-Jazari [n.d.]: 33).

D) [327] Some of the early authorities present the following as the reason for the insertion of marks into the Qur’an:

- Abu Aḥmad al-‘Askari (d. 382 AH) said: ‘It has been related that the reason for the marking of the Qur’ans was that people modified their reading of the Qur’ans over the forty years or so until the days of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, then misreadings multiplied and spread in Iraq. Al-Hajjaj therefore turned to his scribes to ask them to place signs on these identical letters...’ (al-‘Askari 1908: 9–10).
- Abu ‘Amr al-Dani (d. 444 AH) reported from Yahya ibn Kathir that he said: ‘The Qur’an was bare (of marks) in its first copies, then the first innovation in it was marks on the ya’ and ta’; people said there was no harm in that since it clarified it’ (al-Dani 1960: 2).

These and other texts confirm that diacritical marks were used for the Arabic script during the pre-Islamic period and the time of the Prophet (pbb) and the rightly guided caliphs, and that the Qur’an was divested of marks upon its collection so that its
skeleton might bear all the readings which were transmitted from the Prophet (pbuh) and so that Arabs might be able to read the Qur’an each according to his dialect. For example, the word yunshizuha could be read, without diacritical marks, as yanshuruha, and both readings are found for this word. The sentence fa-qubidat gabdatan (Qu’ran 20.96) can be read with the letter dad, and its meaning is then ‘I took with my whole hands’; it can also be read with the letter sad, then meaning ‘I took with my fingertips’. When need demanded, marks were introduced into the Qur’an, beginning with vowel marks by Abu l-Aswad al-Du’ali, then diacritical marks by Nasr ibn ‘Asim al-Laythi and Yahya ibn Ya’mar al-’Udwani.

These literary texts and opinions are corroborated by documents, inscriptions and Islamic coins with dotted letters and dated to before the pointing of Qur’ans,26 and they are, in date order:

- Ahnas papyrus, dated 22 AH (Figs 21–22).
- Inscription of Zuhayr, dated 24 AH (Figs 2–4).
- Inscription of ‘Abdallah ibn Dayram from Wadi Sabil, by Najran, 46 AH (Figs 15–16).
- Mu’awiyah dam inscription at al-Ta’if, 58 AH (Figs 19–20).
- [326] Al-Khanaq dam inscription by Medina, from the reign of Mu’awiyah (40–60 AH), though not dated to a specific year (Figs 23–24).27
- Inscription of Hafnat al-Abyad near Karbala, dated 64 AH (Figs 25–26).
- Inscription of ‘Afir ibn al-Mudarib, dated 83 AH (Figs 29–30), which is from the Syrian pilgrimage road in north-west Saudi Arabia (Ghabban 1414/1993: 143).

There are also other inscriptions and documents, which have dotted letters but are later than the likely date for the introduction of dots on Qur’ans, such as:

- Papyrus of Hisham ibn ‘Umar, dated 91 AH (ibid. 159, pl. 33).
- Writing on the picture of the kings of the world at Quṣayr ‘Amra (ibid. 159, pl. 33).

The inscription of Zuhayr, the subject of this study, is considered a new and substantial clue to the existence of diacritical marks before their appearance on Qur’ans. It is a clue of particular importance in view of its being the oldest dotted inscription and the oldest dated inscription discovered so far.

### A comparative study of the script

This inscription was written in the Hijazi script, which was used in Mecca and Medina at that time. The information available in the sources about this script is very meagre, and examples of it in inscriptions and documents are likewise extremely limited. The most important mention of it in the sources is a brief reference in the Bibliographical Index of Ibn al-Nadim, in which he says: ‘The first Arabic script was the Meccan script and after it the Medinan; then came the Basran and the Kufan. As regards the Meccan and Medinan script, there is a slant to the right in its alifs and an elevation of the vertical strokes, and in its form there is a slight inclination’ (Ibn al-Nadim 1398/1978: 8). [325] He also notes

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26 The sources do not mention a fixed date for the reform undertaken by Nasr ibn ‘Asim al-Laythi and Yahya ibn Ya’mar al-’Udwani, rather they indicate that it was accomplished on the order of al-Hajaj, and it is known that al-Hajaj ruled Iraq in the years 85–95 AH, and that Nasr ibn ‘Asim died in 89 AH. The date of the marking of the Qur’ans fell then in the years 85–89 AH; Ibn Khayyat 1405/1985: 307–308; Yaqut 1977: 19: 224.

27 Dr Sa’d al-Rashid discovered this inscription (1421/2000: 46–60), which has just one dotted letter (ta on the word al-Salt); it is a foundation stone, dating the construction of the Khanaq dam to the reign of Mu’awiyah.

28 Kept in the Islamic Art Museum in Cairo, no. 18327.
29 Kept in the Islamic Art Museum in Cairo, no. 16753/6.
30 Kept in the Islamic Art Museum in Cairo, no. 21883.
three varieties of the Medinan script: the rounded (mudawwar), the triangular (muthallath) and the composite (tīm) script (ibid. 9). The nature of the triangular and the rounded may be understood from their names, and the composite may combine the qualities of these two types (Jum’a 1968: 18; Al-Fi’r 1405/1984: 9).

The Arabic script developed from the Nabataean script, which came to the Hijaz before Islam along with the trade that the Qurashis practised (Naji 1935: 6; al-Jabburi MS 1974: 36; al-Jabbburi S 1381/1962: 19; 1977: 51–70). When it arrived in Mecca, it was known by that town’s name [i.e. Meccan script], and after the emigration of the Prophet (pbuh) to Medina and the establishment of an Islamic polity there the Hijazi script was linked with it and called the Medinan script. When the focus of military and political activity moved to Iraq in the caliphates of ‘Umar ibn al-Khatţab and ‘Ali ibn Abi Ṭalib, the scripts moved with it to Basra and Kufa, and it was known at first by the names of the towns that it had come from, but afterwards the terms ‘the Basran script’ and ‘the Kufic script’ were applied to it. Soon the Arabic script in Kufa improved considerably and, with the passage of time, its forms diversified. The fame of the two varieties of Kufic script, the stiff and the pliant (al-yabis wa-l-layyin), surpassed that of any other script, and mention of the Basran, Meccan and Medinan scripts ceased while the name of the Kufic remained in common use (Jum’a 1968: 26–7; ‘Alyuh 1983–1984: 208–10; Al-Fi’r 1405/1984: 43).

Although the name of the Meccan and Medinan scripts disappeared outside the Hijaz after the expansion in use of the Kufic script, these scripts did continue in use within the Hijaz for a long time. One may consider all the inscriptions located in Mecca, Medina and their environs to be written in this type of script, especially those dated to the first century AH. This is true also for the documents and inscriptions found outside the Hijaz, which have a connection with the early conquerors and the date of which goes back to the period of the rightly guided caliphs.

Examples of the documents and inscriptions of the first century AH which can be assigned for certain to the Hijazi script (the Meccan and the Medinan) are, in the opinion of the author, the following:
The Ahnas papyrus, drafted in 22 AH by the conquering army, which entered Egypt from the Hijaz.

The inscription of Zuhayr dated 24 AH.

The inscription of Aswan dated 31 AH, a gravestone of one of the first Muslim settlers in Aswan; it can be considered as an example of the triangular Hijazi script.

[324] The inscription of al-Batha, dated 40 AH, of ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Khalid ibn al-‘As, who is considered to be one of the clan of al-‘As of the tribe of Quraysh.

The inscription of al-Batha, dated 40 AH, of ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Khalid ibn al-‘As, who is considered to be one of the clan of al-‘As of the tribe of Quraysh.

The inscription of ‘Abdallah ibn Dayram, dated 46 AH, located near Najran.

The inscription of al-Khashnah, dated 52 AH, located near Mecca.

The Mu‘awiya dam inscription near al-Ta’if, dated 58 AH.

The al-Khanaq dam inscription, which Mu‘awiya built near Medina.

A number of other undated inscriptions from Mecca, Medina and the other regions of the Hijaz, the script of which bears the same features as the previous inscriptions. The most exceptional of them are: the
commemorative inscription on the dam of the Ranuna’ valley by Medina (al-Rashid 1421/2000: 68–71) and the inscriptions of Mount Sala’ published by Muḥammad Ḥamidullah (leaving aside the veracity of the history which he imputed to these inscriptions) (1939: 427). There are also some letters attributed to the Prophet (pbuh), although there is much doubt about the authenticity of these documents (Hamidullah 1986: 97, 111, 137, 149).

Relying on Ibn al-Nadim’s classification of the Ḥijazi script into three kinds — the rounded, the triangular and the composite — one can say that the Zuhayr inscription bears the hallmarks of the rounded Ḥijazi script, the Aswan inscription bears the hallmarks of the triangular Ḥijazi script and the Mu‘awiya dam inscription at al-Ṯa‘if the hallmarks of the composite Ḥijazi script, which is between stiff and pliant.

Orthographical features of the Zuhayr inscription

1. The text is devoid of any vowel marks, i.e. the marks indicating the short vowels ‘a’, ‘u’ and ‘i’ and other related marks. The pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions from Zebed (Figs 31–32), Jabal Usays (Figs 33–35) and Ḥarran (Figs 6–8) are similarly lacking in vowel marks. Indeed, they are not found in any of the texts of the first decades of the first Islamic century, either prior to the inscription of Zuhayr or subsequent to it (not the Aḥnas papyrus, nor the inscriptions of al-Batha, al-Khashna, Najran, Mu‘awiya’s dam, nor the leaves said to belong to the

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31 It is worth noting that some of the letters of this inscription bear diacritical marks.
‘Uthmanic Qur’an texts).\textsuperscript{32} We have already referred to the disparity in Arab knowledge of vowelling before the reform of Abu l-Aswad al-Du’ali. Some deny Arab knowledge of vowelling in the earliest period while others think it highly unlikely that [323] letters could have been devoid of vowel marks until they appeared on Qur’ans, pointing to reports about the Companions stripping Qur’ans of vowel marks, which suggests that vowel marks were used on other media. Others again adopt a compromise position, saying that the Companions themselves began inserting vowel marks, but they did not make of the marks a system that comprised the whole Qur’an; rather it was an alleviating measure by them until Abu l-Aswad came and incorporated them into a proper system with principles and rules to be followed.\textsuperscript{33}

2. Diacritical marks are used on some of the letters; the marks deployed in the inscription are of the rounded sort (i.e. dots), which are the oldest form of marks used.\textsuperscript{34} We find them on the Ahnas papyrus (22 AH), the Wadi Sabil inscription at Najran (46 AH), the Mu’awiya dam inscription (58 AH), the Khanaq dam inscription in Medina (reign of Mu’awiya) and on most of the inscriptions and documents of the first century AH that bear diacritical marks.

Diacritical marks feature on nine letters of the Zuhayr inscription, which are, in order of their appearance in the inscription: on the nun of the word ‘I’ (ana), on the zay and ta’ of the word ‘time’ (zaman), on the ta’ and fa of the word ‘died’ (tuwuffiya), on the nun and ta’ of the word ‘year’ (sana), and on the shin and the nun of the word ‘twenty’ (ishrin). These marks are made singly, as a pair and as a trio.

\textsuperscript{32} See the images of these texts and inscriptions in al-Munajjid 1972: 38, 40, 51, 101, and also Figures 8–10 accompanying that study.

\textsuperscript{33} For more information on this subject see al-Jabburi S 1977: 147–150; Abu l-Aswad’s name was Zalim ibn ‘Amr and he died in Basra in 67 or 69 AH.

\textsuperscript{34} The other type of diacritical mark in inscriptions comes in the shape of a small line or stroke; the oldest examples of it are found in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock on the words mustaqim and yattakhidh and on one of the milestones of ‘Abd al-Malik on the word thamaniya (Fig 27).
The single marks are made in three different ways:

- There are letters bearing a single dot at their highest point, directly above the beginning of the letter, with a slight tendency to the left or right. Examples of this are the dot of the nun on the word ana, the dot of the zay on the word zaman, and the dot of the nun on the words sana and ‘ishrin. The letter sana is dotted three times in the Ahnas papyrus: on the word al-jazar, which appears twice, and on the word ajzaraha. In all three cases the dots are placed above the beginning of the letter and a little to the left. The medial nun is dotted in the same way in the Ahnas papyrus (on the words Ahnas, sufunihi and sana), in the Mu’awiya dam inscription at Ta’if (on the words bintiya and ansaraha) and in the inscription of ‘Afir ibn al-Mudairib (on the word amantu). The final nun appears dotted for the first time in the Zuhayr inscription, on the words zaman and ‘ishrin.

- [322] A single dot may be put above the middle of the letter; this has just one example in the Zuhayr inscription, on the fa of the word tuwuffiya. The method of these dottings resembles the dotting of the fa in the word ighfir on the Mu’awiya dam inscription and of the fa in the word ‘Afir on the inscription of ‘Afir ibn al-Mudairib.

- A single dot may be put below the letter; this has one example in the Zuhayr inscription, on the ba of the word arba’, which is placed on the right side of the letter and a little in advance of its beginning. The letter ba’ also appears dotted on the word arba’in in the Wadi Sabil inscription in Najran, on the words bintiya, kataba and Habbab in the Mu’awiyiya dam inscription, on the words wa-kabbir kabiran in the Hafnat al-Abyad inscription and on the word al-Mudairib in the inscription of ‘Afir ibn al-Mudairib.

There are two examples of pairs of dots in the Zuhayr inscription: on the ta’ of the word tuwuffiya and of the word sana, and they are put one above the other with a clear inclination to the right on the ta’ of the word tuwuffiya. We find other examples of this form on the word matti in the Mu’awiyiya dam inscription and on the word yattabkhih in the Dome of the Rock inscription. As for the two dots of the ta’ of the word sana in the Zuhayr inscription, they were placed almost adjacent to one another. Ta’s dotted with two dots next to one another appear on the word al-Šalt in the Khanaq dam inscription, whilst ta’s dotted with two dots one above the other feature in a number of the early inscriptions with diacritical marks: on the word thabbitu in the Mu’awiya dam inscription, on the word mustaqim in the Dome of the Rock inscription and on the word yashtakika in the papyrus of Hisham ibn ‘Amr.

There is also one example of a trio of dots in the Zuhayr inscription, on the letter shin of the word ‘ishrin. They are placed successively and horizontally, one dot on each of the letter’s teeth. The shin is dotted in the same way in the words shahr and shahr in the Ahnas papyrus, in the word yashtakika in the Hisham ibn ‘Amr papyrus, and in the word al-najashi in the inscription accompanying the fresco of the kings of the world at Quṣayr ‘Amra in Jordan. The dots of the shin appear in the form of an upward-pointing triangle, as is done today, in the text from Hisham’s palace in Jericho, Khirbat al-Mafjar, on the word ‘atash’tash; the date of this text is the late first century AH (al-Jabir S 1977: 159, pl. 39).

3. The hamza is not displayed; the letter representing it is deemed sufficient. It is represented by alif in the words ana and arba’, which is in accordance with the rules and with the general practice for recording the hamza in inscriptions and Qur’ans. The hamza is represented by alif in the inscription of Aswan despite the fact that the construction is passive [321]; thus it should be represented by ya’ (qi’a/قیا) in the sentence ‘Ask pardon (from God) for him when this inscription is read out and say amen’ (istaghfir lahu idha quri’a hadha l-kitab wa-qul amin). But this should not be considered a mistake in transcription, because the writer would seem to be following the school that always writes the hamza with alif, an old school in Arabic writing (al-Farra’ 1955: 2.134). Similarly, the hamza is written with waw instead of alif in the inscription of Hafnat al-Abyad, dated 64 AH, where it appears in the phrase Allahu akbar.

4. The feminine ending ta’ is written with closed ta’ (ta’ marbuta), in the form of a ha’, on the word sana in the Zuhayr inscription, but is written with open ta’ on Zuhayr’s other inscription, on the word ibna (ابن), even though the word after it, Shayba, is written with closed ta’. The use of open ta’ for the
feminine ending should not be considered an orthographical error, since it is found in pre-Islamic Arabic texts: on the word *sana* in the Jabal Usays (528 AD) and Harran (568 AD) inscriptions [and the word *'mt* in the Zebed inscription (AD 512 or soon after), RGH]. It seems that the trend to write the feminine ending *ta* in the form of a *ha*' began before Islam, since in the Jabal Usays inscription we encounter the words *Mughira* (unless to be read *Mu'arraf*) and *maslahā* written with closed *ta*’, despite the fact that the word *sana* appears in the same inscription written with open *ta*’. The latter feature would seem to be in the process of slowly disappearing shortly before Islam, though it still continued for some time in the Islamic period (al-Hamd 1408/1986: 41), as is evidenced by the word *sana* in the Aswan inscription (31 AH), and the word *ibna* in the second Zuhayr inscription, which may be assigned the same date as the inscription of Zuhayr that is the subject of this study, i.e. 24 AH [and the word *rahnā* in the al-Batha inscription of 40 AH, RGH].

It remains for the author to point out that the inscription cannot be used as evidence for the omission of the medial *alif*, since this type of *alif* is absent from the words written by Zuhayr. It is a widespread orthographical phenomenon in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabic texts, and it occurs in the Ahnas papyrus and in most of the documents and inscriptions of the period of the Rashidun caliphs and the Umayyads.

**Distinctive characteristics [320]**

The principal characteristics of the script of the Zuhayr inscription may be summarised as follows:

- a) softness in the angles of the letters
- b) frequent curving in letters with loops, such as *mim* and *waw*
- c) inclination to the right in isolated *alifs* and to the left in final *alifs*
- d) absence of any decorative additions on the *alifs*
- e) inclination to the right in the tooth of initial *ba*'/*ta*'/*mun*/*ya*’, as in the words: *bism, tuwuffiya, ana* and *arba*
- f) additional length of the tooth of medial *ba*'/*ta*'/*mun*/*ya*’ when joined to letters of the same kind
- g) lack of any elevation of the loop of *ta*’ *marbuṭa* and final *ha*’ above the baseline or the strokes of the adjoining letters
- h) the small size of the *ra*’ and *zay* and their execution in the shape of a small arch
- i) the execution of the lower half of the letters *ra*’, *zay*, initial *ha*’ and *mim* below the baseline (i.e. the straight line aligning the text)
- j) use of open *'ayn*
- k) a long bottom line of initial *'ayn*, extending further forward than the arch of the *'ayn* that ascends from it
- l) smallness of the upper part of the letter *kaf*
- m) inexactness in the rounding of the loops of the *mim*
- n) lengthening of the tail of the *mun*
- o) an additional stroke at the top of the cat-eye *ha*’
- p) a curtailing of the tail of the *waw*
- q) execution of the tails of *waw*, *mun*, *'ayn* and *ya*’ below the baseline
- r) use of the reverting *ya*’ [where the tail of the *ya*’ goes back below the preceding letters, RGH].

[319] The author will now present a description of the way in which each letter is written, comparing it to letters of texts that are close in time to the Zuhayr inscription (Table 1):

*Alif* is written twice as an upright line, without any backward stroke at its bottom end. In the word indicating God Almighty [אֲלֵי it is written with a leaning to the right hand and a stroke sloping to the right, which fits Ibn al-Nadim’s description of the *alifs* of the Medinan script (Ibn al-Nadim 1398/1978: 8). *Alif* without the additional stroke appears in the inscriptions (Figs 31–32) of Zebed (AD 512+), Jabal Usays (AD 528) and Harran (AD 568), as is also the case for all the *alifs* of the Ahnas papyrus, which are less upright than those of the Zuhayr inscription.

*Ba*’ occurs three times: initial in the word *bism*, medial in the words *katabtu* and *arba*’, and is in both cases written with a long tooth. This is contrary to how it is written in the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions where its tooth is short: in the word *bin* of the inscriptions of Zebed and Jabal Usays and in the word *banaytu* of the Harran inscription. The initial *ba*’ does resemble examples of it in the word *bism* in the Ahnas papyrus and the Aswan inscription (Figs 11–12, 21–22). Medial *ba*’ with a short tooth is found in the words *'Abdallah* and *ashabuahu* in the
Ahnas papyrus, in the words ‘Abdallah and Ḥabbab in
the Mu‘awiya dam inscription and in the word ‘Abd
al-Rahman in the al-Batha inscription.

Tel occurs four times:
- Initial in the word tuwuffiya where it is
  written with the tooth not exceeding the
  height of the following letter; in this it
  resembles the letter ta‘ in the word tdrq
  (Theodoric) in the Ahnas papyrus.
- Medial after the letter kaf in the word katabtu,
  written with a long tooth, higher than the
  tooth of the adjoining ba‘; in this it resembles
  the ta‘ that appears after the letter kaf in the
  word kata‘ibihi in the Ahnas papyrus.

Table 1. A chart of the letter forms of the Zuhayr inscription compared with those of other early Arabic inscriptions.

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<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Mu‘awiya Dam 58 AH</th>
<th>Aswan Inscription 31 AH</th>
<th>Zuhayr Inscription 24 AH</th>
<th>Ahnas Papyrus 22 AH</th>
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Final and open at the end of the word *katabtu*, written again with a tooth longer than that of the preceding *ba’*; this is an old form of the final *ta’*, which we encounter in the word *banaytu* in [318] the Harran inscription, and again in the word *sana* in the Aswan inscription, which is slightly later than the Zuhayr inscription.

Final and closed, attached to the preceding letter and distinguished by being at a right angle to the baseline. There is one example in the word *sana*, which is written in a more developed way that the word *sana* in the Ahnas papyrus and closely resembles the closed *ta’* in the words Mu’awiyah and *binya* in the Mu’awiyah dam inscription at al-Ta’if.

*Ra’* occurs three times: final and connected to a preceding letter, as in the words Zuhayr and ‘Umar, where it is written in the shape of a small arch; medial and unattached, as in the word *arba’*, written in the same way.

*Zay* occurs twice: initial and unattached in the words Zuhayr and *zaman*; it is written like the *ra’*.

One may note that the *ra’* and *zay* in the Zuhayr inscription have the same small size as those in the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions, but they have a softer curve than their pre-Islamic counterparts. The *ra’* is written with a right angle in the words *Sargw* in the Zebed inscription, *Ibrahim* in the Jabal Usays inscription, and *Sharahil* and *bar* in the Harran inscription. The *ra’* and *zay* of the Zuhayr inscription resemble those in the words *al-jazr*, *Abu Qir* and *‘ashara* in the Ahnas papyrus; *al-rahman*, *al-qabr* and *istaghfir* in the Aswan inscription; *rahma* and *arba’* in the al-Batha inscription; *ighfir* and *Hubayra* in the al-Khashna inscription; and *arba’* in the Wadi Sabil inscription at Najran.

*Sin* occurs twice: initial in the word *sana* and medial in the word *bism*. In both cases it is written with equal-sized teeth, an old form that appears in the Jabal Usays and Harran inscriptions, and it also corresponds to the *sin* of the word *sana* in the Ahnas papyrus and Mu’awiyah dam inscription at al-Ta’if.

*Shin* occurs once in medial position in the word *‘ishrin* and is written with equal-sized teeth. We find examples of this form in the word *Shurayh* in the Zebed inscription and the words *‘ashara*, *shah* and *shahr* in the Ahnas papyrus. It is worth saying that the word *‘ishrin* in the Zuhayr inscription resembles all the letters of the word *‘ishrin* in the Ahnas papyrus.

*‘Ayn* occurs three times:

- Initial and attached, twice in the words *‘Umar* and *‘ishrin*; it is written in the form of an arch attached to the straight line of the text. This form has developed from the initial *‘ayn* that appears in the word *‘ala* in the Jabal Usays inscription, and resembles the *‘ayn* in the words *‘Abdallah*, *‘ashara* and *‘ishrin* in the Ahnas papyrus, *‘Abd al-Rahman* in the al-Batha inscription and *‘Ali* in the al-Khashna inscription.

- Final, written in the form of the open *‘ayn* (a right angle resting on its head) connected to a rounded tail. It resembles to a certain degree the *‘ayn* of the word *matti*’ in the Mu’awiyah dam inscription with the reservation that the tail of the latter has a clear right angle in it. The head of the open *‘ayn* is also used in writing the medial *‘ayn*, and that is how it appears in Nabataean, pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabic inscriptions.

*Fa’* occurs once: medial, attached to a following letter, in the word *tuwuffiya*. Its form is almond-shaped and similar to the letter *waw* in its loop and tail. It resembles the letter *qaf* in the word *Abu Qir* in the Ahnas papyrus as regards the almond shape of its loop, but differs from the initial *fa’* and *qaf* in the Aswan inscription which are written with an angle, close to the shape of a triangle, as in the words *fi*, *qara’* and *qul*.

*Kaf* occurs once: initial, in the word *katabtu*. It is written with curved bends and a short flourish. It is an old form of the *kaf* which appears before Islam in the word *al-malik* of the Jabal Usays inscription, and we also find *kaf* of this form in the Ahnas papyrus, in the words *al-akbar*, *kata’ib*, *kataba*, and in the word *kataba* in the al-Khashna inscription dated 52 AH.

*Lam* occurs twice in the word for God Almighty [*‘âlî*]. It is written as a very upright vertical stroke and a tail in which a curving distances it from the form of a right angle. *Lam*, connecting to the following letter, appears as a vertical stroke inclining to the right and a tail at a slight obtuse angle in pre-Islamic inscriptions. We find it with the same form as in the Zuhayr inscription in the Ahnas papyrus and the inscriptions of Aswan and the Mu’awiyah dam at al-Ta’if.
[316] **mim** occurs three times, medial and final, in the words *bism, zaman* and ‘Umar. It is written in the shape of a loop, half of it above the baseline and half below it. One may note the lack of exactitude in the roundness of the loop of the *mim* and the slight protrusion at the end of the final *mim* in the word *bism*. The form of the *mim* in the Zuhayr inscription is highly developed and more perfected than its counterparts in the inscriptions of Zebed, Jabal Usays and Harran. It does appear there in the shape of a loop in the middle of the baseline, as in the words *Mar al-Qays, Mughira, maslah* and *mafsad*; but it also appears as a half loop or arch above the baseline [e.g. *al-malik, Talamu* and ‘*am* in the Jabal Usays and Harran inscriptions, RGH]. The form of the *mim* in the Zuhayr inscriptions resembles to a large degree its form in the Ahnas papyrus and the Mu’awiyah dam inscription.

**Nun** occurs twice:
- Medial in the word *sana*. It resembles the form of the *nun* in the Ahnas papyrus and the Mu’awiyah dam inscription for the same word, though it is dotted in the Zuhayr inscription and Ahnas papyrus, but not so in the Mu’awiyah dam inscription.
- Final, written with a large, curved tail. Final *nun* does not appear in this form in the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions. The oldest attestation of this shape in dated texts is found in the Ahnas papyrus in many words, such as *khamsin, Ahnas* and *min*, with the observation that the tails of the *nun* in the Ahnas papyrus end in a small additional upward stroke, which is not on the *nun* of the word ‘ishrin in the Zuhayr inscription.

**Ha’** occurs twice:
- Medial in the name Zuhayr. It is written in the shape of what is known as cat’s eye, through the middle of which passes the baseline, and at the top is a small additional stroke. This form is quite similar to the *ha’* of the two words *Ahnas* and *shahr* that appear in the Ahnas papyrus. One should note the difficulty of executing the *ha’* of this complicated form on stone, which explains the lack of a well-rounded circle in the two parts of the *ha’* in the Zuhayr inscription. This type of *ha’* does not feature in the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions, but does appear in some of the inscriptions from the beginning of the first Islamic century [315] in the shape of a single circle through which passes the baseline of the text, dividing it into two halves. This *ha’* is used in the word *Allahumma* (‘O God’) in the inscriptions of Wadi Sabil, al-Khashna and the two dams of Mu’awiyah.
- Final *ha’* occurs once, in the word for God Almighty. In its form it resembles the aforementioned closed *ta’* that joins to a preceding letter.

**Waw** occurs twice, connected and isolated, in the word *tuwuffiya* and the ‘*and*’/wa’ before ‘ishrin. It is written as a reasonably well-rounded loop with a short compact tail that does not go beyond the loop above it. The *waw* in the Zuhayr inscription differs from the *waw* in the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions. In the latter the tail of the *waw* takes the form of a slanting line, which makes it closer to the form of the Nabataean *waw*. The *waw* in the Zuhayr inscription is quite similar to the *waw* of the Ahnas papyrus.

**Ya’** occurs twice: Medial in the name Zuhayr, written with a long tooth between the *ha’* and the *ra’*. Final and joined to what is before it in the word *tuwuffiya*. It is written in the shape of the reverting *ya’*, which appears in the words *a’la* and *bani* in the second Umm al-Jimal inscription, one of the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions (Al-Jabburi S 1977: 87) that may date to the sixth century AD (Figs 36–38). The reverting *ya’* in the Zuhayr inscription is probably the oldest such *ya’* to appear in a dated Arabic text, since it does not appear in the Ahnas papyrus, whereas we do find it in the Aswan inscription, dated 31 AH, in the words *fi* and, on its own, *ihda*, and also in the al-Khashna inscription, dated 40 AH, in the word ‘*ala’.

**Conclusion**

The Zuhayr inscription may be considered an excellent example of the Arabic script in the time of the rightly guided caliphs and as a new and substantial addition to the small corpus of dated pieces of textual evidence from that period. It also helps to settle any doubts over the authenticity of the Ahnas papyrus, since it is only two years later than the date of that papyrus and, like the papyrus, has diacritical marks on many of its letters. Furthermore, it is possible to regard this inscription as the best
specimen of the Medinese Hijazi script among the inscriptions that have appeared to date.

The fact that this inscription is distinguished by diacritical marks corroborates the view that this phenomenon was not the invention of Nasr ibn ‘Asim and Yahya ibn Ya’mar, but existed long before their time and was used in daily correspondence and in case of need as a facilitating tool. However, it did not have firm rules and it would seem that Nasr ibn ‘Asim and Yahya ibn Ya’mar were the first to add diacritical marks to Qur’ans in a comprehensive manner. The Companions had stripped Qur’ans of diacritical marks — which had been known to them beforehand — when they collected them in the reign of ‘Uthman for a number of reasons, the most important of which was enabling Muslims to read the Qur’an as it was revealed to Muhammad (pbuh) in the various dialects of the Arabs, and allowing the skeleton of the word to bear all the meanings which appear in it.

In addition, the Zuhayr inscription, with its early date, has now become the oldest dated Islamic inscription and may be added to the list of early dated Islamic documents. The content of this inscription also has a special importance in view of its allusion to the event of the death of the rightly guided caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab.

This comparative study of the script of the inscription has shown that some of its letters have preserved the same form that they had in pre-Islamic Arabic texts, namely, the alif, medial ba’, medial and final ta’, sin, open ‘ayn, the lam that joins to a following letter, initial mim and medial nun. Equally, some of the letters of this inscription display signs of development from their form in pre-Islamic texts, namely, closed ta’, zay, initial and final ‘ayn, kaf, medial mim, final nun, initial and final ha’, waw and reverting ya’. It is possible that the shapes of some of these letters had already evolved during the pre-Islamic period, but lack of any material indications from inscriptions and documents prevents any firm decision on this. It may be that the Qur’an scribes of Muḥammad (pbuh) introduced many of the changes to the forms of the Arabic letters to facilitate their work, something that the new conditions and necessities would have required for scribal work in the Medinan community after the emergence of Islam and the large amount of material that had to be constantly and continuously recorded.
Finally, one should take note of the considerable similarity between the letter forms of the Ahnas papyrus and those of the Zuhayr inscription despite the different materials that they are written on, papyrus and stone. The difference in the material bearing the text did not impact much upon the basic features of their script. Perhaps this may be attributed to the fact that their script is of the curved Medinese Hijazi type, as mentioned above, and to the closeness in time of their execution. The only letter that differs in form between the papyrus and the inscription is the reverting ya’, which is used in the inscription but not in the papyrus.

Comments by Robert Hoyland
The inscription found by ‘Ali Ghabban and Hayat bint ‘Abdallah al-Kilabi and the above study raise some very interesting questions and we are very grateful to them both for their labours. Here I will touch briefly on some of these questions and also refer to some recent relevant Western publications to complement Dr Ghabban’s very useful references to recent Middle Eastern publications on this subject.

The reform of the Arabic script
There are two innovative features of the documents of the first few decades of Islam that are perhaps not given enough attention, namely that they are dated to the same new era (beginning in 622 CE) and written in an Arabic language and script that is startlingly uniform. Both of these features are present in the Zuhayr inscription, but it is the latter that we will concentrate on here, as it is the primary focus of Dr Ghabban’s article. There is, as Dr Ghabban notes above, hardly any difference in letter forms between the Zuhayr inscription and the Ahnas papyrus. Both texts also attest to a system of diacritical marks being used on papyri and inscriptions already in the 20s AH/640s CE; although the dots are not used all the time as in later Arabic, they are used on the same letters as in later Arabic, and so it is evidently the same system (Jones 1998); moreover they are used with purpose rather than randomly (Kaplony 2008). And there are a number of other signs of an attempt to reform the Arabic script. For example, there was evidently a move to standardise the writing of the feminine ending as a closed rather than an open ta’ even in construct (i.e. when linked to a following noun). The Ahnas papyrus only has the closed ta’ (خليفه عشره شاهه); the second Zuhayr inscription, however, has both forms (بتيدة نبية), a testimony to the transformation in progress. Long ‘a’ (آ) was also the object of regularisation. Whereas in pre-Islamic texts, medial ā is never written (e.g. in the Harran inscription: Zlmv for زلیم; Jabal Usays: al-Hrth for al-Hārith; Zebed: Mnfiw for Manāf and al-‘lh for al-‘lahi), this changes under Islam and ā becomes more commonly denoted by alif, although this is a much more gradual change (Diem 1976). This prompts us to ask what or who was responsible for this reform of the language.

Two of the most important pre-Islamic Arabic texts, Nemara (the epitaph of ‘lmru’ al-Qays son of ’Amr, King of all the Arabs’, dated AD 328) and Jabal Says, were composed by agents of Arab kings, and the Harran text at the behest of a phylarch (noted in the Greek part of the text). It makes sense that it would be such characters who would have promoted the writing of Arabic, endowed as they were with a measure of power and resources and perhaps also with a sense of Arab identity (especially if the reading ‘king of all the Arabs’ is correct for the Nemara text). Since some were important allies of Rome, it would also be natural to suppose that they had at least a rudimentary administration, and therefore scribes at their disposal (Hoyland 2007). Certainly they were called upon to arbitrate in local disputes — for example, according to a papyrus from Petra, the Ghassanid phylarch was instrumental in the settlement of a contest between two church deacons concerning the sale of a vineyard (Kaimio 2001). Moreover, there are many accounts that relate, in a somewhat legendary character, how such kings spent their subsidies in imitating their imperial overlords, establishing luxurious courts and offering patronage to artists, a practice with a long history among imperial vassal states. Yet, allowing for some exaggeration, it is very plausible that such rulers established some sort of a political and administrative structure and patronised a degree of learning. One could thus easily imagine such leaders to have been behind attempts to regularise the writing of Arabic.

There are, it is true, numerous references to writing and writing materials in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry (Jones 2003). There is even a possible allusion to the
The use of diacritical marks and the writing of the Qur'an

A number of the contributors to the Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an (McAuliffe 2006) make the statement that ‘in the first century [AH] and even later Arabic was written in a *scriptio defectiva*, without distinguishing between consonants of a similar shape’, i.e. ‘a number of consonants were rendered by a single homograph that only later was differentiated through points placed above or below the letter form’ (2006: 47, 68, 99; cf. pp. 32, 116–117, 146, 212). What the authors in this Cambridge Companion are claiming is that it is a defective Arabic script that explains deviant readings in the Qur’an and the difficulty in establishing a canonical text. Yet we know from the Zuhayr inscription and other contemporary texts that these diacritical points were used from as early as the 20s AH (AD 640s). So, were diacritical marks used in the writing of the earliest Qur’ans? If they were, then, as can be seen from the quotations from the Cambridge Companion above, Western scholars would at least have to revise many of their theories of the transmission of the Qur’an (and the whole field of scholarship that involves rearranging the diacritical marks of words in the Qur’an to get a more ‘reasonable’ reading would at the very best have to be reassessed). But if not, why, given that there did exist a system of diacritical marks that was used for official correspondence and personal inscriptions, was it not employed for writing early Qur’ans? Some of the classical Muslim sources allege that the Companions of Muhammad removed the diacritical marks (*jarraduha*) from the Qur’ans they had put together, as Dr Ghabban has noted above. This implies that the marks were on the individual pages (*ṣuḥuf*) from which they had compiled the complete text, but that the Companions deliberately removed them, or at least stopped them being applied to the Qur’ans, so that the Qur’an could be read in subtly different ways — seven different ways in fact, the number of different ways of reading the Qur’an that were sanctioned by God. This may, of course, be a pious fiction to ground the variant readings of the Qur’an in the practice of the Companions themselves. Unfortunately, in the absence of any Qur’ans firmly dated to the first century AH, it is difficult for us to be sure. Numerous ones are said to be dated to the first century (http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Qur-an/Text/Mss/ gives eleven examples; interestingly, all but one bear dots on some letters35), but the dating is always by script (i.e. no actual date is written on the text itself) and by comparison with other Qur’an manuscripts (e.g. Dutton 2004). Inevitably, this only gives us a chronological range rather than a fixed date. However, the comparative analysis of early Qur’anic manuscripts is becoming ever more sophisticated and it seems that we can now arrange some of the early Qur’an folios in chronological order starting from the mid-first century AH/AD 670s (Déroche 2002 and more generally Déroche 2005). What can be said is that there are definite indications that the Qur’an was treated as a special case, distinct from documents

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35 By contrast, the only clearly dated pieces of Qur’an text we do have, two inscriptions from the area of Mecca bearing verses of the Qur’an and dated 80 AH, do not have diacritical marks (Fahmi 1407/1987).
and inscriptions. For example, as mentioned above, the pre-Islamic practice of not writing medial ی was changed before or during the reign of 'Umar I (634–644), deploying ʿalif for this purpose (freed up by the decline in the use of ھامزة, which ʿalif had originally represented), but the pre-Islamic practice is followed in early Qur’ans (though sometimes یاء and $response[60] are used), perhaps indicating a very conservative attitude towards the writing down of the Qur’an.

'Umar I

It seems all but certain that the 'Umar mentioned in the Zuhayr inscription refers to the caliph 'Umar, second ruler of the Muslim polity, since 24 AH/644 AD was indeed the year of his death and it is hard to imagine any other 'Umar being famous enough to be alluded to in this way without the need for any further clarification. And yet the absence of any epithet or title is striking. One is reminded of the picture presented of 'Umar in the Muslim sources as being of ascetic tendencies, spurning the luxuries and vanities of this world, as in the following:

The kings of Persia and Byzantium marvelled at the Muslim ruler and the fact that he went out, dressed in rags, to vanquish tyrants, people of entrenched kingship, skilled administrators, politicians and financiers. It reached them that treasures were being brought to 'Umar and that he distributed them instead of storing them up and that somebody had said: Oh commander of the believers, would it not be a good idea to store up this wealth for emergencies that might arise, and that 'Umar had replied: This is an idea that Satan has put into your head. It would not affect me adversely, but it would be a temptation for those who come after me ('Abd al-Jabbar 1966: 328–329).

But what was the nature of 'Umar’s office, and of the early Islamic ruler in general? Crone and Hinds have collected numerous Muslim sources that give ‘the official title of the Umayyad head of state’, from 644 onwards, as ʿkhaliṣat ʿAllah, ‘deputy of God’, which, as they note, ‘implies a strong claim to religious authority’ (1986: 11, 5). They oppose the claim of these same sources, however, that Abu Bakr and 'Umar took the title ʿkhaliṣat rasul ʿAllah, ‘deputy of the messenger of God’ (i.e. deputy of Muhammad) and rejected that of ‘deputy of God’, averring that they were successors of Muhammad and no more than that. It is true that this does sound like a pious attempt to contrast the humility of the first two Muslim rulers with the arrogance and presumption of the Umayyad dynasty. However, there are some oddities about the title ʿkhaliṣat ʿAllah too. If it was really the most basic title of the Muslim ruler, why was it so rarely used in inscriptions and documents (Crone and Hinds put literary and documentary evidence on the same footing, so this disparity does not stand out in their survey of the use of the title)? For example, in the first 200 years of Islam it was only used by one ruler, 'Abd al-Malik, and then only on one medium, coins — even rebels who minted coins in this period only aspired to be ‘commander of the believers’ (thus the Kharijite Qatari ibn Fuja’a).

Crone has generally argued, very persuasively, in favour of the gradual evolution of Islamic institutions and against the idea of institutions emerging in full bloom at the beginning of Islam, so should we not assume the same here? Would not a claim to an all-powerful religio-political office from as early as 644, one that superseded prophethood, have seemed somewhat presumptuous and been difficult to establish when the memory of Muhammad was still so recent? Certainly, the absence of titles in the aforementioned epigraphic reference to 'Umar (assuming it is genuinely about him) bespeaks a modest conception of rule, but it is unique, and so there is little more we can say at present.

36 Though there are also references (collected by Hakim 2005) to 'Umar and Abu Bakr accepting the title ʿkhaliṣat ʿAllah.

37 On buildings, milestones and documents he used ‘commander of the believers’ and others referred to him thus; e.g. al-Rashid 1416/1995, no. 59: ‘May God incline unto (Sallā ʿAllah ‘alā) the servant of God ‘Abd al-Malik commander of the believers’.

38 See Crone & Hinds 1986: ch. 3, for this vision of the caliphate; they do note that Abu Bakr and 'Umar may have been different from their successors (ibid. 111–115), but perhaps one should extend the formative period of the office of the caliphate to the time of 'Abd al-Malik (so was he the first to use the title ʿkhaliṣat ʿAllah as the numismatic record implies and as is argued by Landau-Tasseron [2000: esp. 212–213]?).
References


Majallat Kulliyat al-Adab, al-Jami’a al-Ma’ṣriyya 3/1.