

# Early South Arabian-Islamic bilingual inscription from Najran

At the foot of a mountain locally known as 'Upper Naṣla Mountain' in the centre of Riḡla quarter which lies on the southeastern part of Najran city, an Islamic inscription written in Arabic *Kufic* script and a reproduction of its contents in *Musnad* script were recently found. They are located about three metres apart. Beside the *Kufic* inscription there were two other Islamic inscriptions; one of them belongs to the same person mentioned in the bilingual inscription, whereas the other refers to a different person. These two inscriptions will be included in this paper because of their temporal and spatial link to the bilingual inscription and their historical significance in assisting its dating (1).

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## Inscription No. 1

A. The Islamic inscription (Figs. 1–2)

Text: طوق بن الهيثم

Transliteration:

Ṭawq bin al-Hayṭam

B. The *Musnad* Inscription (Figs. 3–4)

Text:

1. 𐩧𐩢𐩨 𐩨𐩣𐩨
2. 𐩣𐩨𐩣𐩨 𐩨𐩣𐩨

Transliteration:

1. Ṭawq bin
2. al-Hayṭam

Commentary:

The contents of the inscription whether in the Arabic or *Musnad* scripts are identical, that is they both consist of the name of a person called *Ṭawq bin al-Hayṭam* (2). It should be noted that the scribe inserted vowel letters in the *Musnad* inscription even though vocal phonemes were mostly not expressed in *Musnad* scripts, such as the letter 'w' in *Ṭawq* and

'y' in *al-Hayṭam*. Moreover, the scribe used the Arabic definite article *al* in the *Musnad* inscription. The former two elements indicate that in writing the *Musnad* inscription the scribe may have been influenced by the Arabic writing system. Furthermore, the name *Ṭawq* does not appear in early Arabian inscriptions, rather it appears as a proper name for a person of Arabic heritage (3). The name is derived from *al-fawq* which means 'the ability to do things' (4). Likewise, his father's name *al-Hayṭam* which means 'the nestling of an eagle' (5) does not appear either, but it is repeatedly mentioned in Arabian lineage books in its known form with the definite article *al*.

## Inscription No. 2 (Figs. 1-5)

Text:

1. غفر الله
2. لطوق بن ا
3. لهيتم امين

Transliteration:

1. ḡafara Allāhu
2. li-Ṭawq bin al-
3. Hayṭam Amīn

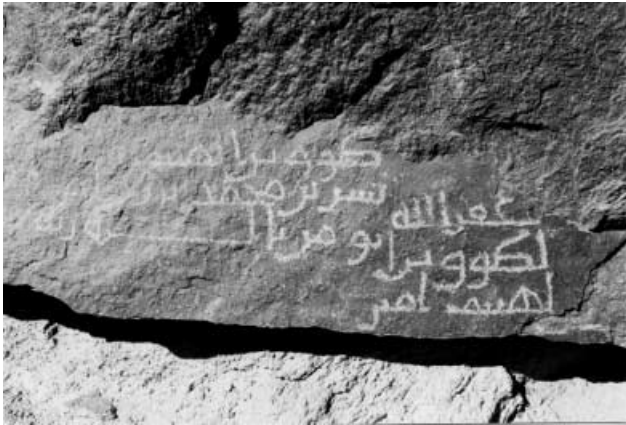


Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

*Translation:*

1. May Allah forgive
2. Ṭawq bin a
3. l-Haytam Amen

*Commentary:*

This inscription belongs to the same person mentioned in the bilingual inscription (No. 1). The scribe did not limit the text to the person's name as in inscription No. 1, but also added a religious formula often repeated in Islamic inscriptions. This formula consists of asking for forgiveness from Allāh at the

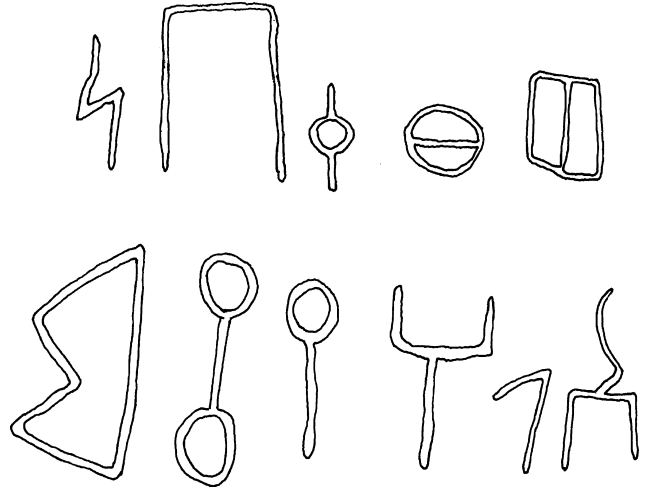


Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

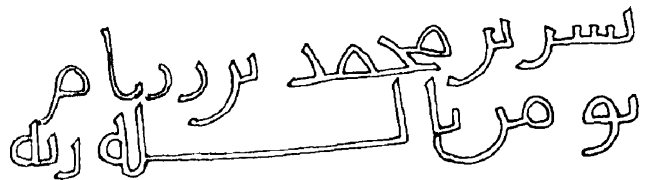


Fig. 6.

beginning and ending the text with the word *Amen*. Also worth mentioning is the fact that the first letter of the name *al-Haytam* was written at the end of the second line whereas the rest of the name was written in the third line, such a phenomenon being a well-known feature of Islamic inscriptions.

**Inscription No. 3 (Figs. 1–6)**

*Text:*

1. بشر بن محمد بن رزام
2. یومن بالله ربہ

*Transliteration:*

1. Bišr bin Muḥammad bin Rizām
2. Yu'minu bil-lāhi rabbihi

*Translation:*

- 1-Bišr bin Muḥammad bin Rizām
- 2-believes in Allāh his Lord

*Commentary:*

The inscription begins with the name of its owner followed by his father's and his grandfather's names but excludes any mention of further names or his *nisba*. It then concludes with a religious phrase declaring belief in Allāh; this phrase is a common feature that occurs frequently in Islamic inscriptions. The name of the owner of the inscription is derived from the verb *baššara* which means 'announce good news' (6). This name occurs as a proper noun in Sabaic, Hadramitic and Safaitic inscriptions (7) and as a name of a Sabaeen deity (8). The name of his father *Muḥammad* (9) occurs in Sabaic and Safaitic inscriptions (10). As for the final name *Rizām*, it might be connected to *Rizām bin Muḥammad*, who was mentioned by al-Hamdānī in his description of the region of Sarū Madḥij, when he said that *Rizām bin Muḥammad* belonged to the tribe of *Kuṭaif* (11).

### Dating the inscriptions

The three inscriptions contain no indication of a date. Moreover, the protagonists of these inscriptions are not well-known characters and the inscriptions do not contain any reference to historical events, therefore any attempt to determine the date of these inscriptions will depend on the comparative study of letter forms and methods of writing. When we look closely at the letters of the texts, we find that they were written simultaneously, i.e. inscriptions 1 and 2 belong to a single person, whereas inscription 3 was written using the same method as for the other two but belongs to a different person.

One of the inscription letters that may help in determining the date of the texts is the initial *tā'* in inscriptions 1 and 2, which was written in the Nabataean style, where the upper straight part of it was inclined to the right instead of being straight as it was used in the late Islamic inscriptions. The first evidence of this letter in early Arabic inscriptions appears in the *Harran* inscription (568 AD) (12). Its

use in this pattern continued till the third century after Hijra (13). The letter's earliest evidence in the Islamic period appeared in the *Ihnas* papyrus (22 AH/643AD) (14) and the *al-Abbasah* inscription (71 AH/691AD) (15). Its appearance in that form continued and was visible in many inscriptions dating to the beginning and mid-third century after Hijra (ninth century AD). For example, this letter appears in an inscription dating back to 218 AH (833AD) (16) and in another dated 246 AH (860AD) (17).

Another letter that may help to determine the date of the texts is the medial *hā'*. In the two inscriptions (Nos. 1 & 2), it was written in a triangular shape above the base line, with its hook straight and dividing the triangle into two parts. The shape of this letter is evident in Islamic inscriptions since the second century after Hijra (eighth century AD). It appears in that shape in an inscription from Bī'r as-Sā'ib dating back to 165 AH (781 AD) (18). The letter's extensive appearance was notable in the third century after Hijra. Its pattern continued to the fifth century after Hijra (eleventh century AD) (19).

The last letter that may help to determine the date of the texts is the shape of the initial *ḡayn* in inscription No. 2. It is similar to the Nabataean form in its elongation at the base. The first appearance of this letter in early Arabic inscriptions was in *Rum B* dating back to 300–350AD (20). This letter was also found in the same shape in the *Umm al-Jimal II* inscription (sixth century AD). Its earliest evidence in Islamic inscriptions appeared in the *Ihnas* papyrus (22 AH/643AD) (21), in the *Aswan* inscription (31AH) (22) and in the *Mu'āwiya Dam* inscription (58 AH/677–678 AD) (23). Its shape as it appears in inscription No. 2 became a prevailing characteristic of Islamic inscriptions of the second and third centuries after Hijra (eighth and ninth centuries AD).

As illustrated above, the comparative study of letter forms and methods of writing of these three letters indicates that they probably date back to the end of the third century after Hijra (ninth century AD).

### The historical significance of the inscription

The phenomenon of early Arabic bilingual inscriptions is well known and occurs repeatedly. For instance, there were Safaitic inscriptions that were

written in Nabataean (24), Palmyran (25) or Greek (26), and there were some Thamudic inscriptions that were found written in Nabataean or Greek scripts (27). That is also true of early pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions, most of which were written in more than one script. For example, the *Raqqūš* inscription (267AD) was written partially in the early Arabic and Thamudic scripts (28); the *Umm al-Jimal I* inscription was written in both the Arabic and Greek scripts (29); the *Zabad* inscription was inscribed in the early Arabic, Syriac and Greek scripts; and the *Harran* inscription (568 AD) was inscribed in the early Arabic and Greek scripts (30).

Currently, the Najran bilingual text provides us with the first evidence of an Islamic inscription written in the Musnad script. This bilingual inscription confirms what some Arabic sources frequently mention about the continuity of writing in Musnad in the early Islamic period by the people of Yemen (31). On the other hand, this inscription presents material evidence that supports the fact that the Yemeni scholar Abū Al-Ḥasan al-Ḥamdānī (who

lived in the mid-tenth century AD/fourth century AH) knew the Musnad script and was capable of reading its letters at that time (32).

The importance of Najran's bilingual inscription also extends to presenting new evidence that proves the continuation of the usage of the Musnad script to a later period than was determined by specialists. It is known that the latest dated inscription written in Musnad is CIH 325 (33), dated back to the year 669 according to the Himyaritic calendar, which corresponds to 555 AD. Researchers lean towards the probability that the Musnad script continued after that date in a number of undated south Arabian inscriptions (34). Currently, the *Najran* bilingual inscription provides empirical evidence of the continuation of the practice of writing in the Musnad script in southern Arabian regions in the early Islamic period. In light of Najran's bilingual inscription, one can assert that the Musnad script continued to be known and used until at least the end of the third century AH/ninth century AD.

## References

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