

THE ANCIENT SOUTH ARABIAN MINUSCULE INSCRIPTIONS ON WOOD
A NEW GENRE OF PRE-ISLAMIC EPIGRAPHY*

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Introduction: The development of Ancient South Arabian studies

When the first accounts of written documents from pre-Islamic South Arabia came to light in the scholarly world in 1811, their finder, the German physician Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, had already died while on his journey to the legendary capital of ancient Saba.¹ His few drawings of inscriptions, however, published in the *Fundgruben des Orients* (Fig. 1), mark the beginning of a new branch of Oriental Studies in Europe: Ancient South Arabian (ASA) or, according to the main cultural area, Sabaic Studies. It was Emil Roediger in his *Versuch über die himjaritischen Schriftmonumente* of 1841 who presented the first comprehensive and successful attempt at deciphering these inscriptions and analyzing the language behind them, based on Seetzen's fragments and a few other texts that had been found in the meantime.²

This language had long been considered as uniform and called 'Himyarite' ('himyaritisch') according to the medieval Arab tradition. Only at the end of the nineteenth century, in his *Süd-arabische Chrestomathie* (1893), Fritz Hommel differentiated two dialects, Minaic and Sabaic ('Minäo-Sabäisch'), on the basis of discoveries especially from the Jawf area in northern Yemen. Subsequently, the accumulation of epigraphic material from different regions of Southern Arabia allowed an identification of at least four dialects of 'Ancient South Arabian' which were called Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, and Ḥaḍramitic respectively according to the names of the ancient political area they came from. This distinction of ASA dialects, proposed for the first time by Ignazio Guidi in his *Summarium grammaticae arabicae meridionalis* of 1926, has become standard up to the present, and forms the base of the reference grammars of ASA by Maria Höfner (1943), Alfred F. L. Beeston (1962), and Gleb M. Bauër (1966). As a slight correction only, in his *Sabaic Grammar* of 1984, A. F. L. Beeston tacitly introduces the term 'languages' instead of 'dialects' with respect to the four idioms mentioned above. As one reason for this change we may consider the fact that in the meantime, as well as the four groups of languages, further dialects had been identified, namely the ones called 'Haramic' and 'Radmanite' by Beeston *op.cit.* Indeed, such subgroupings of dialects make it difficult to avoid revising our terminology for describing the different levels of ASA linguistic history,

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¹ For Seetzen and his journeys in Jemen see Nebes 1995.

² For the early history of ASA studies, see Mittwoch 1935 and Grohmann 1963, 116-120.

regardless of the discussions about an 'objective' definition of the terms 'language' and 'dialect'.

Meanwhile, we are able to draw a fairly detailed picture of the historical development and the synchronous spread of the ASA languages and dialects. Especially for the Sabaeen area, several synchronous dialects can be determined.³ The geographical spread of these dialects, in Middle Sabaic times (first century BC-third century AD), can be illustrated by the map given in Fig. 2. But what are the arguments for classifying these dialects as Sabaic? Compared with the neighbouring Minaic, Qatabanic, and Ḥaḍramitic ones, the main characteristics of the Sabaic language are the formation of causative stem and personal pronouns with *h* (thus, *hf'l*, *-hw*, *-hmw* etc.), against *s* (*sf'l*, *-sw*, *-sm* etc.) in the other languages, the 3rd person plural feminine of suffix conjugation *f'ly* (against *f'ln*), the existence of a long form of prefix conjugation augmented by *-n* (thus, *yf'ln* and plural *yf'lnm*) and, not universally reliable,⁴ of an infinitive of derived verbal stems augmented by *-n*, both the latter features unknown in the other languages.⁵ In addition, there are several further characteristics of individual ASA languages; these do not, however, occur with sufficient frequency or spread in the inscriptions of all these languages to allow an appropriate definition of each individual text.

However, all our knowledge of ASA grammar and style up to the end of the past century was based on so-called 'monumental' inscriptions. This type of inscription is characterized, of course, by the nature of the inscribed material (mainly stone blocks, rock surfaces and, much less frequently, objects of bronze), but primarily, by the characteristic shape of its letters, the 'monumental' ductus of script (two examples are given in Figs. 3-4, cf. also the palaeographical chart, Fig. 9). More than 8000 of such inscriptions from Ancient South Arabia have been published so far, divided between the four main languages as follows: 5300 Sabaic, 1700 Qatabanic, 850 Minaic, and about 750⁶ Ḥaḍramitic ones. As for the genres represented among these texts, we should look at the evidence of Sabaic, since this is by far the best documented language in the area. Out of the more than 5000 Sabaic inscriptions, leaving aside the short texts and graffiti containing only names (about 1400), we have approximately 1100 dedicatory inscriptions (of which 800 are from Middle Sabaic times), 850 building inscriptions, and 200 documents of legal character. Other genres, like commemorative inscriptions, designations of objects etc., are much less represented; the rest are fragments.

From this rough overview, it will already be evident that the comparatively large number of inscriptions is not matched by a similarly wide range of text genres. In other words: the evidence of the monumental inscriptions provides only a rather limited insight into the language that was actually spoken by the authors of these texts. Everyday documents, like letters and private records, or even 'literary texts' in a narrower sense of the term, have not yet been

³ A detailed picture of this development is drawn by Stein 2004b.

⁴ The augmented infinitive occurs, as a regular pattern of grammar, only in the central and northern regions of the Sabaic language realm.

⁵ For these grammatical features, cf. in detail, with extensive discussion and examples, the relevant chapters in Stein 2003a.

⁶ This number is considerably increased if we add the finds from the excavations of the last decades at Raybūn, which number more than 2700 items (according to Frantsouzoff 2003, 64), of which the first part (458 numbers from the temple Ḥaḍrān) was published by Frantsouzoff 2001). However, the bulk of this published material consists of very small fragments bearing hardly a complete word, but rather single letters. Therefore, this corpus is mainly excluded from the number of actual Ḥaḍramitic inscriptions given above.

found among these inscriptions.⁷ Consequently, many aspects of the social and economic life of the inhabitants of pre-Islamic South Arabia have remained obscure, as well as the actual state of grammatical and stylistic expression of the ASA languages. One striking example will illustrate the consequences of this situation: The formation of the 1st and 2nd person, pronominal and verbal, in the ASA languages was, apart from a handful disputed examples, completely unknown to us since the formula of the different types of monumental inscriptions prescribes, as a rule, the use of the 3rd person only.

A new type of inscription: the discovery of the ASA minuscule texts

At the beginning of the 1970's, two wooden sticks, said to originate from the Jawf in North Yemen and bearing several lines of text in a hitherto unknown script, were put at the disposal of the Jordanian scholar Mahmud al-Ghul.⁸ Due to the alleged provenance of these inscriptions, their language was supposed to be some ASA language or dialect; the cursive character of their script, however, allowed a basic decipherment only in the late 1970's. Because of his early death (1983), M. al-Ghul was not able to publish his results. During the following years, his work was continued by Yusuf M. Abdallah (Ṣan'ā'), Walter W. Müller (Marburg), and the late Jacques Ryckmans (Louvain-la-Neuve). In the meantime, other pieces of similar character had come to light. In 1986, the first of these inscriptions, a legal deed, was published by Y. M. Abdallah. Three years later, A.F.L. Beeston made public the text of the two sticks of M. al-Ghul, which were identified as letters of very similar background. The first monographic study on these inscriptions, a result of the long team-work of the above-mentioned J. Ryckmans, W. W. Müller, and Y. M. Abdallah, appeared in 1994. This comprehensive volume not only contains studies on several structural aspects of this new type of inscription, but also a complete publication of 16 pieces from the National Museum and the university collection in Ṣan'ā'. Until today, just under 40 of these texts have been published,⁹ among them 14 letters, 13 legal documents, 4 name-lists, and 2 writing exercises (alphabets). However, there are several thousands of such inscriptions in public collections in Ṣan'ā' (there is talk of 6000 pieces),¹⁰ Munich (800),¹¹ and Leiden (300).¹² It has to be emphasized that this number of texts from probably one single place already exceeds by far the total amount of all hitherto known Sabaic inscriptions.

⁷ Concerning the latter genre, the only exception is the famous 'sun-hymn' from Qāniya, a 27-lines poem with final rhyme on *-hk*, addressed to the goddess Shams, and dating from the end of the first century AD. Only recently, a similar, though slightly shorter poem has been identified among the dedicatory inscriptions from the 'Awām temple in the oasis of Mārib (cf. al-'Iryānī 2005).

⁸ On the history of decipherment of the ASA minuscule inscriptions on wood, see, e.g., Beeston 1989 15f., Müller 1997-1998, and Ryckmans 2001, 223f.

⁹ Besides the already mentioned 'Abdallāh 1986, Beeston 1989, and Ryckmans/Müller/Abdallah 1994, the relevant publications (or, partly, re-examinations) are 'Abdallāh 1994 and 1996, Bron/Lafont 2003, Drewes/Ryckmans 1997, Frantsouzoff 1999, Ryckmans 1993b and 1997, Ryckmans/Loundine 1997, Said/Weninger 2004, Stein 2003b, 2004a, 2005a, and 2005b, and Weninger 2001 and 2002. Cf. furthermore the texts presented by Drewes 2001, 112, Maraqtan 2000-2001, 82, Robin 1991, 132f., and Ryckmans 1998.

¹⁰ In the Yemen National Museum, Military Museum, and University Museum; cf. Maraqtan 2000-2001, 81. Among them are, however, supposedly larger numbers of recent imitations of ASA script (cf. the following note). Up to now, no detailed information on contents and state of the Ṣan'ā' collections has been made available.

¹¹ Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. Almost half of this number are originally unscribed pieces (i.e., sticks prepared for writing, but then never used) to which some 'inscription' has been added by a recent imitator.

¹² Oosters Instituut, cf. Ryckmans 2001, 223f. In personal communication, A. Drewes speaks of at least 280 legible authentic inscriptions.

All these inscriptions have the following characteristics in common (cf. Figs. 5-8). They are carved with a pointed style on wooden sticks or palm-leaf stalks of about 10 to 20 cm length. Due to the specific character of the writing surface, the ductus of these inscriptions, although derived from the monumental script, consequently developed into a separate cursive, called 'minuscule script'. One reason for the difficulty in deciphering these inscriptions was that the cursive shape of these letters of the later periods had apparently nothing in common with the equivalent characters of the monumental script of the very same periods (cf. the palaeographic chart, Fig. 9).

Despite this, the language of the minuscule texts is in fact the same as that of the well-known monumental inscriptions. Consequently, since most of the hitherto known examples originate from the Jawf area, we find minuscule inscriptions in Sabaic as well as in Minaic¹³ and the Amirite dialect. The few examples from Raybūn in Ḥaḍramawt are obviously written in the Ḥaḍramitic language.¹⁴ Accordingly, discovering Qatabanic minuscule inscriptions should be only a question of time. The language(s) of the documents written in the minuscule script exactly resemble the ASA language(s) known from the monumental inscriptions (the few, slight differences, affecting merely phonological and stylistic aspects, are discussed further below). Historically, they cover the entire span of epigraphic documentation from Ancient South Arabia, i.e., from the seventh century BC until at least the fifth century AD.¹⁵ The wooden pieces, cut from palm leaves or tree branches, must be considered the common, since cheapest, writing material in Ancient South Arabia, resembling in its importance the well-known clay tablets of Mesopotamia or papyrus and leather of the Mediterranean region. This material is easily produced and always at hand in every place with a minimum of natural or agricultural occupation. Consequently, the inscriptions written on them contain accounts of everyday life like legal and economic contracts, business and private letters as well as writing exercises and records from religious practice — text genres that had hardly been known before from the area. Such a broad spread of different kinds of texts now enables us to deal also with questions like the organisation of writing, scribal education, and the degree of literacy in Ancient South Arabia. Such questions are the more remarkable since all minuscule inscriptions known so far, numbering about 7000 pieces, might originate from one single spot in the ruins of as-Sawdā' (ancient Naššān). Taking this presumed hoard as representative, hundreds of thousands of such inscriptions still resting in similar archives in all the larger cities of Ancient South Arabia can be expected.¹⁶

¹³ Ryckmans/Loundine (1997) and Drewes 2001, 112.

¹⁴ On them, see Frantsouzoff 1999. The very small corpus (the text of only two small pieces has so far been published) does not allow, however, any further conclusions.

¹⁵ Basic work on the palaeography was done by J. Ryckmans, culminating in his comprehensive study of 2001. His results have been principally confirmed by recent radiocarbon datings (cf. Macdonald et al. 2003). In Late Sabaic times, also minuscule inscriptions are sometimes dated according to the Ḥimyarite era. The latest text known so far dated in this way is Mon.script.sab. 514 from 579 h. (= 469 AD).

¹⁶ The probability of such finds basically depends, of course, on the climatic conditions of their location. Thus, the aridity of the Jawf region and adjacent areas like, for example, the oasis of Mārib, may be considered an ideal precondition for preserving wood underneath the soil surface. It has to be questioned whether similar conditions can be expected for the towns located in the comparatively humid Yemeni highlands.

Love-letters or just business accounts? Implications of the contents of the new material

As already pointed out, the minuscule inscriptions, incised on handy wooden sticks, formed the common writing material in pre-Islamic South Arabia (and probably also beyond throughout at least parts of the Peninsula). Consequently, every kind of written document from all aspects of everyday life should be expected among these texts, and indeed, great many have already been found in the comparatively few examples examined so far.¹⁷ By far the most extensive genre of written material dealing with daily affairs is made up of legal and economic documents. Firstly, the bulk of the letters, which are written exclusively on wooden sticks and palm-leaf stalks, is made up of numerous documents consisting of instructions, covering-letters, and settlements relating to the transfer of goods.¹⁸ Letters containing purely private information are rather rare and deal, for the most part, with matters of everyday life, such as the health problems of relatives:

'Abdallāh (1996): Sabaic letter¹⁹

1. *tbytm l-hnm w-ṭmḥtm 'm-n ḥmw w-dt ḥmy*
2. *l-tsm'n-kmy w'-br-n-h n'mtm ḥdt w-b-dt 'l*
3. *r'yt 'm-n-kmy sṭm w-hnḥrt b'-lbb-kmy w-*
4. *tmy (s²)ṭrn l-h w-h' rs't mrdtm bn 'yn-h w-l-km*
5. *y n'mtm ḥdt*

Message to Ḥanām and Ṭamḥatum from Ḥamwat. May (the goddess) Dāt Ḥamyim (2) hear you. From her (i.e. the sender), greetings were delivered. Since she has not (3) seen from you (any) letter she has complained to your hearts. As for (4) you, write to her! For she suffers from a disease of her eye. For you, (5) greetings were delivered.²⁰

Likewise, familiar, intimate correspondence has not yet been found, a fact that is, perhaps, hardly surprising when we take into consideration the supposed Ancient South Arabian postal system which seems to have been organized in a very open, public way.²¹

¹⁷ The data presented in the following are based on the almost 40 inscriptions published so far (cf. above with note 9) and on about 150 pieces that have already been examined of the Munich collection. A complete edition of the Munich material, being the result of a cooperation project between the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich and the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität in Jena, by the present writer is in preparation.

¹⁸ Cf. e.g. the letter published by Stein 2004a. This letter contains a dunning note to the addressees which is emphasized by quoting a fitting proverb.

¹⁹ The text is based mainly on the transliteration given by 'Abdallāh 1996, 22 (the photograph *op.cit.* 21 is not completely legible); the translation, however, is proposed by the present writer. Letters marked by ¹ have been corrected against the text of the original publication, following some parallels among the inscriptions of the Munich collection. Some proposals for the understanding of the text have already been made by Stein 2003a, 132, 187, and 203 no.s 243, 408, and 468.

²⁰ Considering the previous sentence, the character of the closing formula as purely stereotype becomes obvious. Exchanging greetings and statements of well-being out of any connection to the contents of the actual message is a common feature of many Sabaic letters.

²¹ The evidence of the minuscule texts does not support the assumption of a high degree of literacy in Ancient South Arabia. To the contrary, there are several indications for a rather limited spread of writing, concentrating probably in a few defined places ('offices') around the main temple of a city. A citizen who wished to record a legal affair, or to send a letter, was urged to enter this place in order to have his matter written by a professional scribe (for the arguments, see Stein 2006a).

Deeds of legal and economic affairs were equally written mainly on wooden sticks, but, if they were of public relevance, were also carved on a monumental block of stone. While the latter aimed at a publication of the act in question, the handy sticks, bearing the signatures of the involved parties or of witnesses (cf. the last line of the text in Fig. 7), were safely kept in an archive. In the case of an objection to the matter published in stone, the original document on wood was to be produced in order to testify to the correctness of the act.²² Besides legal and economic contracts,²³ we find receipts, and promissory and obligation notes, dealing mostly with transfers of money or grain:

Maraqten (2000-2001) 82: Sabaic receipt²⁴

1. *hy'lytm 'm-n 'ls'd d-*
2. *hhbt 'glt bnt d-m'dm b-*
3. *wrh d-mlyt d-hrf tb'krb*
4. *bn smhkrb bn hdm*

One *hy'ly*(-coin) from 'Ilsa'ad which (2) was handed over to 'Āgilat, daughter of (the clan) Dū Ma'dim, in (3) the month Dū Malyat of the year of (the eponym) Tubba'karib, (4) son of Sumuhūkarib, of (the clan) Ḥadmat.

Also of economic origin are several sorts of lists, sometimes containing numerals as well as units of measure added to a row of personal or family names.

After legal-economic documents and letters, the next most numerous type of inscription consists of writing-exercises. These exercises can be divided into several distinct levels: simple scrawls ('warming-ups?'), alphabets, repeated copies of a master line, name lists, and copies of several formulaic features (for legal documents as well as for letters):

Mon.script.sab. 102: writing exercise (alphabet)²⁵

- A.1. [...] *t z d y t z*
- A.2. [...] *t' z' d' y' t' z'*
- A.3. [...] *[.]*
- B.1. / *h l h m q w š r b t s k n h* [...]
- B.2. / *h l h m q w š r b t s k n h* [...]
- B.3. / *h l h m q w š r b t s k n h* [...]
- B.4. / *h l h m q w š r b t s k n h* [...]

²² The so-called 'Öffentlichkeitsklausel' in Sabaic: *'-hn-n 'kr l-yyf'n* "Whenever there is an objection, it (sc. the original document) should be produced" (cf. Stein 2003b, 269-272).

²³ For the latter, cf. e.g. the contract published by Abdallah 1994, according to which some sheep are handed over to another person for a limited time for pasturing. The mode of sharing the products of those animals between the owner and the borrower is laid out in the contract (cf. the recent translation of the text by Nebes 2004, 309f.). — A legal practice that is already known from monumental inscriptions is the handing-over of certain people to the control of an established family. Although the actual state of such dependents has not yet been clarified, several accounts of such deeds are known also in form of minuscule documents, one of them having been published by Stein 2003b.

²⁴ The reading of the text is based on the photograph given by Maraqten *loc.cit.*

²⁵ Unpublished; cf. here Fig. 8.

The fragment contains parts of two separate exercises (A and B), text A showing the end and text B the beginning of the ASA alphabet. The master line (l. A.1 and B.1) is repeated several times in a slightly different ductus (cf. Fig. 8).

This differentiated picture of exercises allows us to draw conclusions on the existence of an organized school education of the scribes in pre-Islamic South Arabia.²⁶

Finally, we find inscriptions of a religious background which can, according to their contents and their material appearance,²⁷ be defined as accounts of cult practice. They contain requests for oracular decisions and the deities' answers, and probably served as notes for the priests to help them perform the correct rituals:

A 40-3 (=TYA 16): Sabaic oracular request²⁸

1. *'lmqh-b'l-šb'n yhml'n '*
2. *bd-hw tb'krb l-gzy bn*
3. *y-hw ḡdbm w-twrm bnḡ*
4. *mqrn wrh d-'ttr w-*
5. *bn-hw ystkb n'mtm*

May 'Almaqah, the lord of (the temple) Shab'ān, grant (an oracular decision) to (2) his servant Tubba'karib concerning the decision about his two (3) sons, Ḡaḍbum and Ṭawrum, sons of (4) (the clan) Maqārum, (in) the month Dū 'Attar. And (5) therefrom he will seek luck.

However, literary texts in a narrower sense of the term, like myths and epics, historiography, poems and the like, have not been found among the minuscule inscriptions. Since all the other documents seem also to deal with the everyday affairs of private individuals rather than of rulers or those in authority, we have to assume that the archive known so far was designed simply for public use and was thus located outside the administrative palace. Royal, and perhaps international, correspondence should be looked for in the royal palaces of the capitals of Ancient South Arabia. The genres of literature just mentioned are, if they ever existed, obviously to be looked for in the very same places.

Monumental vs. minuscule texts — the question of vernacular speech in the inscriptions

But what is the special importance of this new type of inscription in the field of linguistics? It is a fact beyond any doubt that the language of the so-called monumental inscriptions is more or less subject to, and thus dependent on, the formulas of each text genre. This dependence may reach to such an extent that even the syntactic construction of a text is disrupted by the strong constraints of a formula. Consequently, it has become a common opinion that these monumental inscriptions are couched in some kind of 'literary language'

²⁶ A comprehensive examination of the so far known school texts is given by Stein 2006a.

²⁷ An earlier assumption that such inscriptions might be examples of private religion, like amulets, is not borne out by the shape of these wooden pieces: apart from their completely unspectacular appearance, they do not exhibit any holes, notches, or the like, for attachment by a thread, like the well-known amulets made of metal.

²⁸ Published by Ryckmans/Müller/Abdallah 1994, 66f. and 104f. as no. 16. The present reading, based on the photograph *op.cit.* 104, differs in line 1 and 3 (end) from the one of the editors. The interpretation of the whole sentence is supported by similar pieces among the Munich collection.

('Hochsprache') in contrast to the spoken vernacular, traces of the latter being expected to occur in everyday documents, such as, for example, private letters. This is the situation which comparison with other, better documented, cultures in the Ancient Near East might lead us to expect.

Now the question is whether this picture is indeed supported by the ASA minuscule inscriptions or not. The following observations are made on the basis of the published material and the inscriptions of the Munich collection examined so far — altogether a number of about 200 texts. Bearing in mind the circumstances of discovery mentioned before, we are dealing with quite a small part of the entire body of material which can be expected to have existed. But even this limited evidence shows such a remarkable degree of consistency that we may draw conclusions beyond the present material. The geographical area in question here, the Jawf region in northern Yemen, is certainly one of the most interesting spots on the Arabian Peninsula concerning Semitic language history. For this region is characterized by a colourful mixture of Semitic languages and dialects, the most important of them being Sabaic and Minaic of the South Arabian branch as well as the Amirite (or: 'Haramic') dialect forming some sort of link between ASA and North Arabian.

First of all, the fact that many of the Sabaic letters found in as-Sawdā' actually originate from cities far outside the Jawf, like Ṣan'ā' and Zafār, ensures that the language of these minuscule texts cannot merely be a local dialect of the Jawf. At least in these letters, we should rather expect the use of a common idiom that was understood in large areas of Ancient South Arabia. Consequently, traces of a local vernacular might be looked for only in minuscule texts of other genres. However, as far as we can see, the language represented in Sabaic texts of those genres, such as legal documents and texts of religious practice, is in no way different from that of the letters.

On the other hand, we have minuscule texts written in Minaic as well as in the Amirite dialect, both of them well documented already in the monumental inscriptions. The grammatical peculiarities of these texts, however, seem to be exactly the same ones as in the monumental inscriptions written in these idioms. Neither Sabaic, nor Amirite²⁹ minuscule texts show any distinctive characteristic which might be determined as a dialect feature typical of these texts, and which does not occur in monumental inscriptions, with only one small exception: in the field of phonology, the replacement of the letter *z* by *ḏ* in all minuscule texts from Middle and Late Sabaic times leads to the assumption that both phonemes should have fallen together in the speech (in contrast to this, the monumental inscriptions without exception keep both phonemes graphically distinct until the end of epigraphic documentation). Consequently, at this first glance, there seems to be no indication of a basic difference between the language of the minuscule and monumental inscriptions.³⁰

However, besides the feature mentioned above, certain grammatical peculiarities do occur in the minuscule inscriptions; but since they are restricted to single cases they do not permit the formulation of rules. These features are mainly the loss of the distinction between *z* and *ḏ* (e.g., *ḏbr* instead of *zbr* "to write", 2 out of 7 examples) and the occasional occurrence of an

²⁹ The minuscule texts written in the Minaic language have not yet been analyzed in detail.

³⁰ Nevertheless, in several minuscule texts we find some kind of mixture between Sabaic and Minaic grammatical features, a point that may be explained by some kind of multilingualism, but still requires further examination.

unaugmented infinitive of derived verbal stems. Nevertheless, these peculiarities occur also in a few monumental inscriptions of the Late Sabaic period.³¹ They can, therefore, not be considered a characteristic of the language of the minuscule inscriptions, but have rather to be taken as an indication of a general decline in the grammatical standard of the spoken language during the last centuries of ASA culture. Other, mainly orthographical, divergencies scattered in the texts do not exceed the common number of scribal mistakes known from monumental inscriptions;³² the existence of such mistakes, some of which have already been corrected by the scribes themselves, is also evident in the minuscule inscriptions. A general difference between the Sabaic idiom of these texts and that of the monumental inscriptions, however, can by no means be confirmed.

On the other hand, really new grammatical features which can be detected from these inscriptions may be considered as some sort of 'specifics' which are restricted to the minuscule texts — in contrast to the monumental ones — due to the specific character of the genres of these inscriptions. The most striking of such novelties are, of course, the morphological patterns of the 1st and 2nd person of verbal and pronominal inflection as well as the formation of the imperative — features that were hardly known from the different types of monumental inscriptions. Thanks to the new material, we are now able to complete our paradigmata to a large extent; an example of the present stage of our knowledge concerning the Sabaic language is given in the following table:

Person		Suffix-conjugation	Prefix-conjugation		Imperative
			(short form)	(long form)	
Sg.	3.m.	<i>f'l</i>	<i>yf'l</i>	<i>yf'ln</i>	
	3.f.	<i>f'lt</i>	<i>tf'l</i>	<i>tf'ln</i>	
	2.m.	<i>f'lk</i>	<i>tf'l</i>	<i>tf'ln</i>	<i>f'l(n)</i>
	2.f.	<i>f'lk</i>		<i>tf'ln</i>	
	1.	<i>f'lk</i>			
Du.	3.m.	<i>f'l(y)</i>	<i>yf'ly</i>	<i>yf'lnn</i>	<i>[f'lnn]</i>
	3.f.	<i>f'lt(y)</i>		<i>tf'lnn</i>	
	2.m.	<i>f'lkmv</i>			
	2.f.				
Pl.	3.m.	<i>f'lw</i>	<i>yf'lw</i>	<i>yf'lnn</i>	
	3.f.	<i>f'l(y)</i>	<i>tf'ln</i>	<i>tf'lnn</i>	
	2.m.	<i>f'lkmw</i>		<i>tf'lnn</i>	<i>f'lnn</i>
	2.f.	<i>f'lkn</i>			<i>f'ln</i>
	1.	<i>f'ln</i>	<i>nf'l</i>		

Furthermore, there are some stylistic peculiarities which can be defined as characteristic of these texts, the most remarkable of which is the extensive use of the enclitic particle *-m(w)*. In contrast to the practice in monumental inscriptions, this enclitic, specifying the meaning of an expression probably in a way like "only, just", is added not only to prepositions and conjunctions, but also to numerals as well as personal and relative pronouns. Consequently, this

³¹ For this evidence, see Stein 2003a, 24f. and 199.

³² See Stein 2002.

extensive use of the particle in documents of everyday life must well be considered as a reflex of spoken language that was thoroughly suppressed in representative monumental inscriptions.

To sum up, the language of the ASA minuscule inscriptions is, as far as we can see at the moment, in no way different from that of the monumental inscriptions. Slight differences are merely limited to stylistic features. The previous assumption that the minuscule texts would represent a clearly discernible vernacular, some vulgar dialect differing widely from the literary 'standard' of the monumental inscriptions, has found no confirmation at all in the texts examined so far. Even regional dialect patterns known from monumental inscriptions, like the Amirite dialect in the Jawf during Middle Sabaic times, occur again among the minuscule material — showing exactly the same grammatical particularities as in the monumental texts.

The importance of the minuscule inscriptions for Semitic studies

However, these latter dialects deserve a closer study because there is a point that may be of interest even beyond ASA linguistics.³³ Unfortunately, since the bulk of the minuscule inscriptions so far known originate from the Yemeni Jawf, we can, for the moment, only deal with the dialect spoken by the tribe of 'Amīr, a people who lived in the Jawf region and beyond in the north of present-day Yemen (cf. Fig. 2), during early Middle Sabaic times (i.e., from the second century BC until the first century AD approximately).³⁴ The character of the Amirite dialect has long been debated, with views ranging from classifying it as a Sabaic dialect to defining it as some kind of 'artificial language' created for certain genres of inscriptions. The basic problem in this discussion is the fact that this dialect comprises Ancient South Arabian, i.e., mainly Sabaic, features on the one hand, but typically North Arabian ones on the other.

The most remarkable characteristic in this connection is the formation of 1st and 2nd person verbal forms of the suffix conjugation. While Sabaic and Minaic use *-k* as personal suffix (*f'lk*, *f'lkmw* etc., cf. the chart above), as do Ethiopic and Modern South Arabian, the only Amirite example so far for such verbal forms from the Munich collection of minuscule inscriptions reads like this:

w-ʾn f-ngwt mṭb³ hmṭʾt hn ʾḥdt f-nḥrm ʾlbb-km hn slḥtm-h
(Mon.script.sab. 427/2f.)

And (as for) me, I have announced the wedding(?) of HMR'T since you have touched (her) Now there is a complaint to your hearts about (the fact) that you have sent her away.

Even if the actual context of this passage remains uncertain in detail, the evidence of the form *slḥtm* in line 3 is entirely clear. If we take this hitherto unique example as representative, we obviously have to conclude that the Amirite dialect in this respect does not follow the practice of the other ASA languages which seem to have the pattern *f'lk* in common, as the

³³ For the following, cf. extensively Stein 2006b.

³⁴ The Amirite occupation of the Jawf is epigraphically documented mainly by inscriptions from the city of Haram, on which see Robin 1992.

evidence from the Minaic letters among the minuscule inscriptions proves. In this particular case, Amirite does rather show a strong linguistic connection to its North Arabian neighbours, the closest of them being situated in the oasis of Qaryat al-Fāw some 400 km north of the Jawf.

This does not, however, necessarily mean that all of the other grammatical specifics of Amirite³⁵ must be of North Arabian origin, too. Some of them, like the lack of mimation, the negation *lm*, and the coordination of main clauses by *f-*, are attested in Minaic as well, already in inscriptions dating from the early seventh century BC. If we still define them as North Arabian, we have to assume such an influence in South Arabia already half a millennium before the occurrence of evidence for the tribe of 'Amīr. The question remains, whether the Amirite dialect, which certainly was a spoken language, as can be detected from its use for writing letters, was genetically a Sabaic dialect or a North Arabian one, or rather some kind of 'pidgin', a mixture developed by the necessity of social and economic communication within a multilingual context.

Against the background of this evidence, we have to recognize that in order to discuss the origin of a particular dialect like Amirite, it is necessary not only to consider the synchronous evidence of the documents written in it and those in the neighbouring dialects, but also the entire span of the history of the ASA languages. As may have become clear from this single example, linguistic history of pre-Islamic Arabia is far from being satisfactorily explained. Of course, the evidence of the minuscule inscriptions has helped to solve many problems of ASA epigraphy. On the other hand, it has produced a couple of new questions which deserve further study. There is a strong indication that the ASA languages can provide important clues for the reconstruction of the origin and development of the Semitic languages. The minuscule inscriptions on wood are, of course, not the only, but certainly one essential piece within this picture.

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³⁵ Cf. the overview given in Stein 2006b.

³⁶ The following list contains some additional entries not referred to in the text.

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Hanjaritische Inschriften von Doffar und Mankat in der Gegend von Jerim im Jemen.
Kopie von U. J. Seetzen 1810.

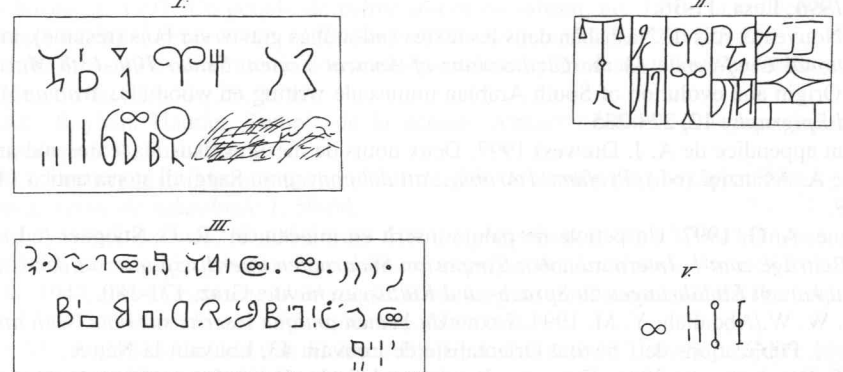


Fig. 1: The first Ancient South Arabian inscriptions known to the scholarly world, drawn by U. J. Seetzen in 1810.

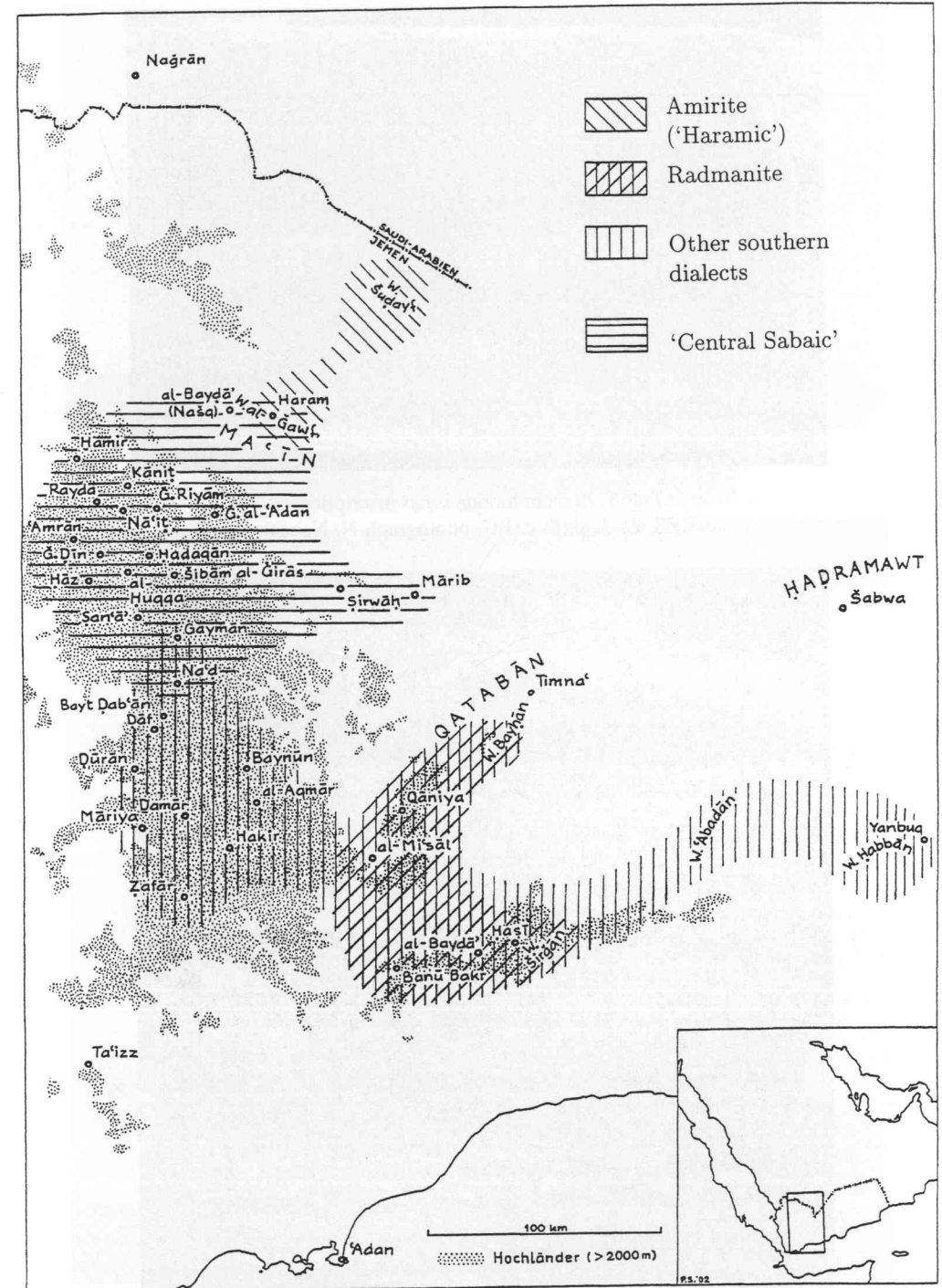


Fig. 2: Geographic distribution of Sabaic dialects (first c. BC-third c. AD).



Fig. 3: Sabaic monumental inscription (RES 3943, sixth c. BC, photograph N. Nebes).

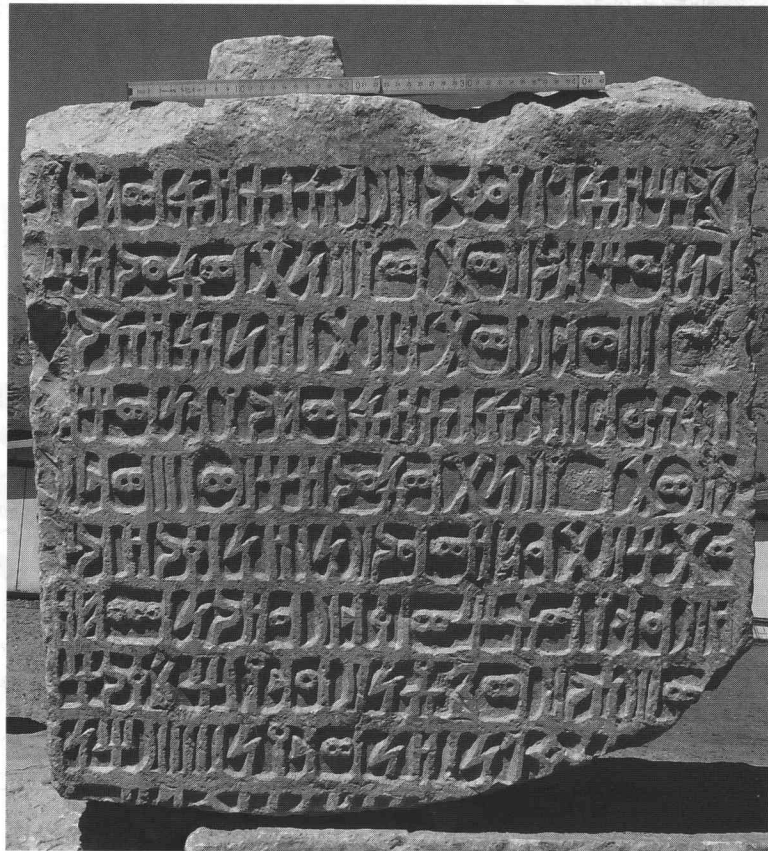
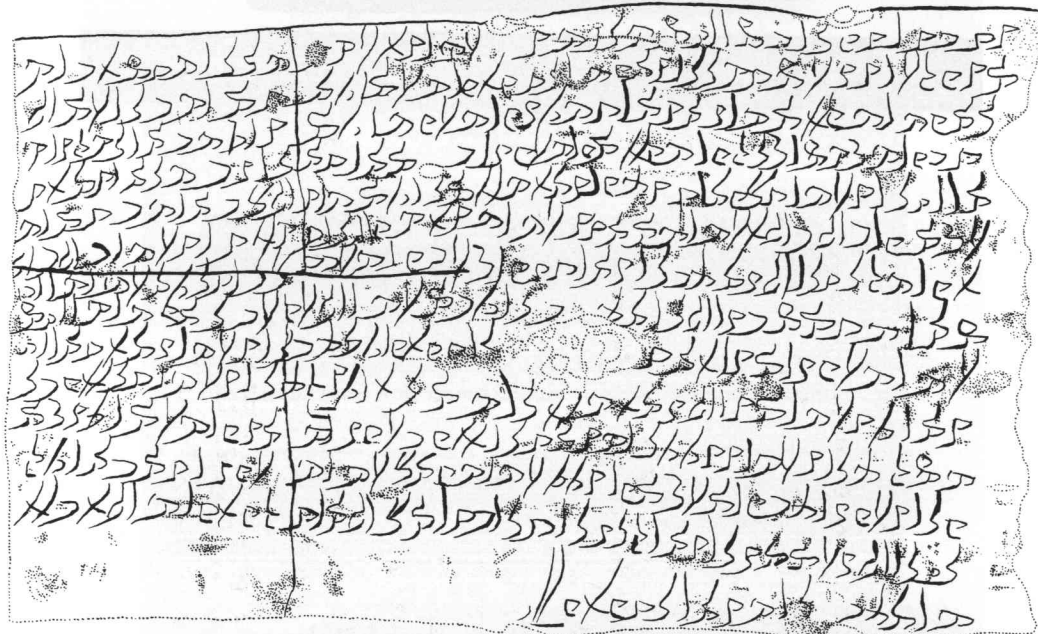
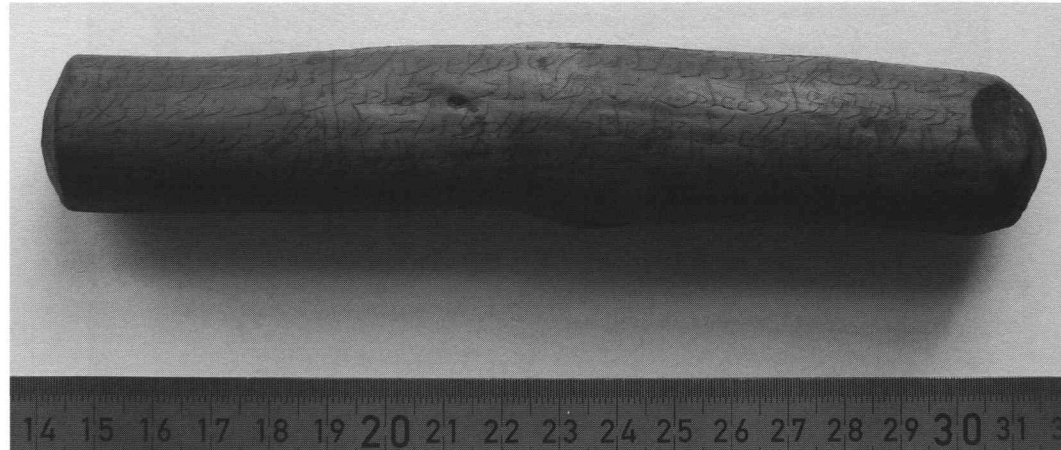


Fig. 4: Sabaic monumental inscription (CIH 540, dated 455 AD, photograph N. Nebes).



Figs. 5a-b: Some examples of inscribed wooden sticks from the collection of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich.



Figs. 6a-b: Sabaic minuscule inscription (Mon.script.sab. 589: a letter, unpubl.).

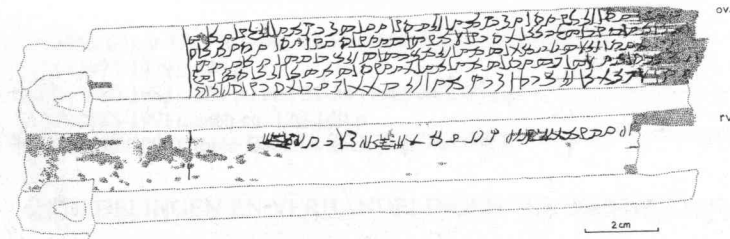


Fig. 7: Sabaic minuscule inscription (Mon.script.sab. 483: a legal document, unpubl.).

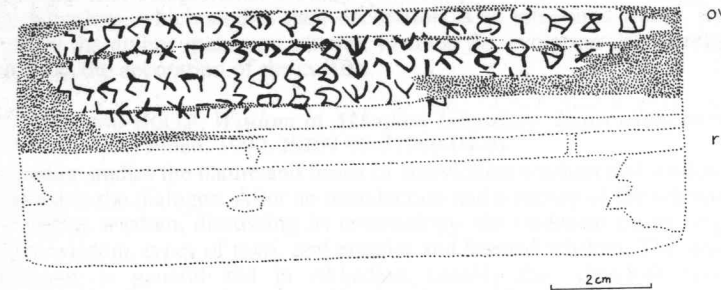


Fig. 8: ASA minuscule inscription (Mon.script.sab. 102: a writing exercise, unpubl.).

	aSab	mSab	spSab		aSab	mSab	spSab
h	⌣	⌣	⌣	ś	⌣	⌣	⌣
l	⌣	⌣	⌣	f	⌣	⌣	⌣
h	⌣	⌣	⌣	'	⌣	⌣	⌣
m	⌣	⌣	⌣	'	⌣	⌣	⌣
q	⌣	⌣	⌣	d	⌣	⌣	⌣
w	⌣	⌣	⌣	g	⌣	⌣	⌣
s	⌣	⌣	⌣	d	⌣	⌣	⌣
r	⌣	⌣	⌣	g	⌣	⌣	⌣
b	⌣	⌣	⌣	t	⌣	⌣	⌣
t	⌣	⌣	⌣	z	⌣	⌣	⌣
s	⌣	⌣	⌣	d	⌣	⌣	⌣
k	⌣	⌣	⌣	y	⌣	⌣	⌣
n	⌣	⌣	⌣	t	⌣	⌣	⌣
h	⌣	⌣	⌣	z	⌣	⌣	⌣
s	⌣	⌣	⌣				

Fig. 9: The palaeographic development of the ASA script, monumental (left column) and minuscule (right column), from Early Sabaic (aSab) until Late Sabaic (spSab) times (seventh c. BC-sixth c. AD).