Article

Connecting the Lines between Old (Epigraphic) Arabic and the Modern Vernaculars

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Abstract: This paper investigates three linguistic features—wawation, the 1CS genitive clitic pronoun, and the relative pronoun—that are shared between the ancient epigraphic forms of Arabic and modern dialects, to the exclusion of Classical Arabic. I suggest that these features represent the earliest linguistic layer of the modern dialects.

Keywords: historical linguistics; Arabic dialectology; Arabic epigraphy

1. Introduction

It has been widely recognized that the diverse forms of spoken Arabic today do not descend in a linear manner from the literary Arabic of medieval prose and poetry—conventionally termed Classical Arabic—or the language of the Quranic Consonantal Text (QCT), Old Ḥiḡāzī (for the most recent appraisal, see Holes 2018a, pp. 1–28; Al-Jallad 2020b, chps. 4 and 5). Indeed, when viewed through the lens of the comparative method, many modern Arabic vernaculars exhibit features that are more archaic than their Classical Arabic counterparts. Na’ama Pat-El (2017) has skillfully identified a number of such features in her 2017 article “Neo-Arabic and Comparative Semitics”. Clive Holes has also done pioneering work on pre-Islamic relics in the modern vernaculars of the Gulf, especially in the realm of the lexicon (Holes 2018b, pp. 112–32). Van Putten and Benkato (2017) isolated relics of an earlier stratum of Arabic in loans in Awjila Berber that is distinct from the present-day dialects of Libya. And I have suggested that the phonology of the emphatics of pre-Hilalian Maghrebian Arabic may be connected to the pre-Islamic dialects of the Levant (Al-Jallad 2015). The existence of these features implies that an unidentified stratum of Arabic that failed to achieve written form in the early Islamic period contributed to the formation of modern vernaculars.

This essay explores the possibility that such ancestors may be attested in the pre-Islamic epigraphic record. Before approaching this question, however, it is important to recognize two things. The modern vernaculars never existed in a vacuum; they have experienced considerable contact with the literary register, which has contributed significantly to their lexicons and to their grammatical structure. In addition to this, interdialectal contact has led to an amalgamation of grammatical features in living speech, ones that originate in different times and places. An obvious example of this is the verb šāf “he saw”, which is nearly pan-Arabic today. šāf, although presently widespread in the Maghreb, was likely a late introduction through inter-dialectal contact (Aguadé 2018, p. 57). It is absent in Maltese, which became isolated from the Arabic sprachraum by the 13th century, and is not used in several pre-Hilalian dialects. These only know rā. The same applies to the Levant. There, šāf is the primary verb used to express “to see” in Lebanon, yet Cypriot Arabic, which originates on the Levantine coast and became isolated from the Arabic-speaking world by the 13th c. CE, does not use this etymon. Instead, it employs two verbs for “to see”—ra (Proto-Arabic *ra aya; Classical Arabic ra’a; Borg 2004, p. 214) and kīše (Qultu qaša; Borg 2004, p. 388). The latter is fossilized as a presentative in Damascene Arabic, šār (Souag 2016). While it is clear that Cypriot Arabic shares a common ancestor with the
dialects of the Levant, in the intervening centuries since its isolation, a new verb for “to see” spread as a result of contact with other dialects, in this case perhaps northern Arabian ones.

Likewise, Cypriot Arabic does not know the pseudo-verb bVdd- “to want” and instead makes use of a verb derived from the root rwd, piri (< *bir¯ıd “he wants”; Borg 2004, p. 256; cf. Classical Arabic yur¯ıdu). This it shares in common with the Qiltu dialects, while the modern dialects of the Levantine coast employ bVdd. The latter may also find its source in the North Arabian dialects, where “to want” can be expressed with the prepositional phrase, (i)b-widd-PN, or simply with widd-PN, literally meaning “in PN’s wish” and “PN’s wish”, respectively. If we employ an archaeological metaphor, a dialect area, such as the Levant, can be regarded as an archaeological section. The layers would reflect different chronological strata of contact-based features and local innovations. While šaf and bVdd may reflect relatively late layers, this paper is interested in identifying the very earliest linguistic strata in the modern vernaculars.

Almost all who have discussed Arabic’s past begin its historical period with the Quran and the nearly contemporary oral poems, passed on traditionally from r¯aw¯ı to r¯aw¯ı until achieving written form in the 8th–9th centuries at the earliest. The Quran itself is far from a linguistic unity. It minimally comprises a consonantal text, rasm, which reflects the local dialect of the H. ig¯az, while the reading traditions imposed upon it draw on various 7th and 8th c. varieties. The combination of these two linguistic types sometimes produces features that may never have been used in spoken language (Van Putten 2021, §3.4; Al-Jallad 2020b, pp. 57–72). Likewise, the oral poems can provide us with a glimpse of the performance language of that particular tradition, but we cannot know how much the odes changed over time as they were passed from generation to generation. Finally, their linguistic unity is little more than an assumption rather than a demonstrable fact. No one has yet, as far as I know, engaged in a truly comparative examination of the poetic tradition’s language on its own terms.

Another corpus suitable for comparison exists: pre-Islamic epigraphy. These texts, which are carved in nearly half a dozen scripts, offer both advantages and disadvantages. To begin with the latter, the inscriptions do not belong to a living tradition. While the researcher has the work of early Islamic philologists to rely upon when approaching the Qas.¯ıdah odes and the Quran, the meaning of the pre-Islamic inscriptions must be reconstructed. However, with a proper comparative approach, and with due attention to archaeological and historical contexts, one can be confident about the meaning and grammar of a large part of the corpus. Nevertheless, the consonantal Semitic scripts that encode these ancient Arabic vernaculars provide us with a very limited view of their phonologies and morphology.

These materials come with advantages as well. We can be sure that their language was not filtered through later, Classicizing traditions. They reflect a register of Arabic used at the time they were produced, and since many are simple graffiti, they likely reflect something close the vernacular of their writers. The pre-Islamic inscriptions, moreover, stretch much further into the past than the pre-Islamic odes, as far back as the middle of the first millennium BCE if not earlier, and cover a wider geographic area, spanning from the Syrian desert to the Yemeni frontier.

As such, how can this corpus aid in the understanding of the linguistic history of the Arabic vernaculars? The answer is not straightforward. In some cases, we may posit a direct developmental trajectory between a phenomenon attested in the ancient sources, but in others, similarities may point towards parallel developments in the history of the language. The following pages will identify three features that the modern dialects share with the ancient epigraphy to the exclusion of normative Classical Arabic. I would suggest that these are reflective of the earliest linguistic layer of present-day vernacular Arabic.

2. Wawation

Proto-Arabic inherited the Proto-Semitic case system with only a few changes, including the emergence of a new declension (Huehnergard 2017; Al-Jallad and van Putten 2017;
Al-Jallad forthcoming), but the case system began to disappear in several ancient dialects of Arabic at approximately the turn of our era, mainly concentrated in the Nabataean realm (Corriente 1976; Blau 2006). The first stage of this process appears to have been the loss of final short vowels and then the loss of nunation (tanwīn), which resulted in a new set of final vowels in triptotic nouns. While a couple of inscriptions attest a functional declensional system in this stage, the majority situation generalizes the nominative ending in all syntactic positions. This feature—conventionally termed wawation—is encountered not only in the Nabataean inscriptions, but wherever one finds triptotic Arabic names in the Aramaic inscriptions of the first millennium BCE and the first half of the first millennium CE. Perhaps the earliest attestation of this feature in the Aramaic script is found in the 5th c. BCE votive inscription of Qaynu son of Gušām king of Qaydar at Tell Maskhūṭah, Egypt (Rabinowitz 1956). Wawation is attested continuously throughout the centuries in northern Arabic dialects, appearing on the anthroponyms and tribal names in the Namārah inscription and even in 6th c. CE Arabic inscriptions from Syria and North Arabia (Al-Jallad forthcoming).

Tell Maskhūṭah (5th c. BCE)
C ẓy qyνw bř gšm mlk qdr qrb l-hn’lt
“That which Qaynu son of Gušām has offered to han-’llat (the goddess)”

Namārah inscription (S. Syria) (328 CE)
w-mlk ʾ-l-ṣryn w-nzrw w-mlsk-hn w-ḥrb mdḥgw
“He ruled the two Syrias and Nizāru and their kings and waged war upon Madḥigu”

Harrān inscription (S. Syria) (568 CE)
ʾn’srhyl bř ṭlmw
“I am Šarahīl son of Ṣalīmu”

The distribution of ancient wawation is as follows: with a few exceptions, it appears on triptotic anthroponyms and on Arabic proper nouns. It does not attach to names terminating with the feminine ending -at, nor does it attach to diptotic names belonging to patterns such as fuʿal, afʿal, and fV/lan or names defined by the article. It is reasonable to assume that this distribution applied to nouns as well, although it is impossible to prove as there are so few examples of Arabic prose written in the Classical Nabataean script. JSNab 17, an Arabic inscription carved in the Nabataean script from Madāʾin Sāliḥ (dated 267 CE; Fiema et al. 2015), marks all triptotic nouns with wawation, including definite forms: ḫgrw = ʾal-Ḥāgr, the ancient name of Madāʾin Sāliḥ, Ṽqbrw = ʾal-qabr ‘the grave’ (Fiema et al. 2015). While wawation does not apply to anthroponyms with the definite article—for example, the name marʿalqays (=imruʾulqays) is always written mrʿlqys and never mrʿlqysw—its application appears to have been extended in the realm of nominal morphology, at least in some varieties.

The u termination is also encountered in the modern Arabic vernaculars of southwest Arabia, concentrated in the Yemeni Tiḥāmah, extending as far north as the dialect of Balqarn (Behnstedt 2016, p. 81; Greenman 1979; Alqahtani 2015). Nouns terminating in a non-etymological u have a distribution virtually identical to anthroponyms terminating in waw in the ancient inscriptions: it is restricted to triptotic nouns and does not occur on nouns with the feminine ending -at. The striking congruence of both of these systems motivated Blau (2006) to compare them directly. While he stops short of suggesting a genealogical relationship between the dialects of Southwest Arabia and the ancient North Arabian dialects, the particular sequences of changes required to produce a nearly identical distribution at both ends of the ancient Arabic sprachraum does suggest that the feature may share a common ancestor.

The Southwest Arabian dialects, however, attest an important difference. There are some dialects where wawation is in complementary distribution with tanwīn. The former appears in pause and the latter in context. Nöldeke was the first to hypothesize...
that the Nabataean  would have developed from -un, but in these Tihámí dialects we see the process in action. The asymmetric situation is rare, isolated to a few dialects of the 'Asir (Behnstedt 2016, p. 81). Rather, most dialects of the area have generalized one form. Those on the Tihámí coast have generalized  while most in the 'Asir have only the nunated ending, either un or in. Thus, as Blau (2006) suggested, the following relative chronology appears secure (Figure 1):

| Stage     | Arabic Form | Description       |
|-----------|-------------|-------------------|
| Stage 1   | al-baytu    | baytu             |
| Stage 2   | al-bayt     | baytun            |
| Stage 3   | al-bayt     | baytu (pause) – baytun (context) |
| Stage 4   | al-bayt - baytu (generalized) | al-bayt - baytun/in (generalized) |

Figure 1. Stages in the development of wawation.

Those dialects exhibiting the baytu/bayt/Vn opposition appear to be more archaic than the Nabataean situation at first glance, but this may simply be an accident of attestation. Since most of the nouns attested in Nabataean occur in an Aramaic linguistic setting, it may be the case that their attested forms are pausal. While there is no direct evidence for the preservation of nunation in Nabataean inscriptions, a clue might be found in the Nahal Hever papyri, which are first c. CE legal documents from the Dead Sea area. The Arabic noun for “contract” is attested with an otiose final nūn, ‘qān. Although Yardeni (2014) suggested that this could possibly be a first person pronominal suffix, it would make little sense in this context. Rather, one could carefully hypothesize that it be interpreted as the ad-hoc writing of context form, with nunation. An even earlier example of functional nunation is attested in a widely known yet unpublished inscription from the Tayma‘a area. The text—carved in an oasis North Arabian alphabet—was authored by the king of Dumat (mod. Dawmat al-Jandal) and can be dated to the middle of the 6th c. BCE based on its reference to the Babylonian king Nabonidus. All non-pausal, non-construct, and non-diptotic nouns terminate in a nun.3

The Bsrn inscription

‘I am Bsrn servant of Nabonidus king of Babylon; I have guarded the spoils with a cavalry unit and a unit of cameleers’

The phrase m’t frs “cavalry unit” is widely attested in the Safaitic inscriptions, which are about half a century later (Macdonald 2014). The appearance of nūns in this inscription suggest that the two words do not form a genitive construction but rather a noun and adverb, bi-mi‘atin farasan. The final word of the inscription, ‘bl, lacks a nūn, perhaps suggesting that it is a pausal form.

This distribution could indicate that both the ancient northern Arabic dialects and those of southwest Arabia share a common ancestor that had undergone the changes described above. Over the passage of time, each group altered the asymmetric pausal vs. context distribution by generalizing one form. The  termination was eventually favored in Nabataean and the Tihámah while the nunated form was favored elsewhere. Some varieties of Nabataean further generalized wawated forms to the definite declension as well, producing the situation we find in JSNab 17.

If the genealogical connection between these two dialect groups is correct, then it may suggest that an ancient dialect of Arabic similar to what is attested in the Bsrn inscription moved south sometime in the first millennium CE and replaced the pre-Arabic languages of the ‘Asir and Tihámah.4 We should further note that Nabataean Arabic and the dialects of southwest Arabia differ in the form of the definite article, al and am respectively. Thus, it is possible that the definite article of the ancestral dialect to both was han-, as attested in the Tell al-Maskhūtah inscription. This morpheme split into ‘al- in the north and ‘am in the south (on the chronology of the Arabic article, see Al-Jallad 2021) (Figure 2).
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morphology, and so this solution, if correct, would provide a unified analysis of wawation

across Arabic.

To conclude, the linguistic stratum of wawation in the Levantine and northern

Mesopotamian dialects, the ancient dialects of the southern Levant, and the modern

Tihāmī and ʿAsīrī dialects would appear to share a non-Classical Arabic common ancestor

with this distinct declensional profile.

3. 1CS Genitive Clitic Pronoun

The next feature I would like to consider is the 1CS genitive clitic pronoun. In all

forms of Arabic, the shape of this pronoun is dependent upon the termination of the noun
to which it attaches, as in other Semitic languages, but its distribution can vary from dialect
to dialect. The pronoun has two allomorphs: -t and -ya.

| Proto-Dialect       | 1CS Genitive Clitic Pronoun |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Northern            | (ḥ)al-bayt ṣawiyūn – baytu  |
| Asīrī               | am-bayt ṣawiyūn – baytu     |
| Tihāmī              | am-bayt baytu               |

Figure 2. Evolution of wawation in Nabataean, ʿAsīrī, and Tihāmī Arabic.

Wawation is today not only attested in southwest Arabia. It is also found in the Levant

and Mesopotamia, where it is realized as u or o, depending on the dialect. It has a much

more restricted distribution: the feature is found on high frequency kinship terms, such as

Levantine Arabic ʿammu “paternal uncle”, ḥālu “maternal uncle”, šālu “grandfather”, šādūdū

“idem.”, and on feminine nouns, ḥālu “maternal aunt”, etc. In northern Mesopotamia the

u/o-termination applies only to masculine kinship terms, while feminine nouns terminate

in -a; in Mardin, feminine vocative nouns terminate in -e. This distribution speaks against

viewing the suffix as a third person masculine singular clitic; there would be no reason that it should be restricted to masculine nouns. Grigore (2007, p. 203) suggested that, at least

for the dialect of Mardin, the termination could have a Kurdish source, but Procházka

favors a Semitic origin as its distribution extends far beyond the areas in which Persian

or Kurdish influence would seem possible (Procházka 2020, pp. 95–96). If I may go

further, I would suggest, given the broader Arabic context, that the u/o-termination is a

reflex of wawation as attested in Nabataean and in the southwestern Arabic dialects. The

distribution in the Mesopotamian dialects matches the situation in Nabataean—it does

not apply to nouns terminating in the feminine ending. The etymology of the feminine -a

remains unclear. Perhaps Grigore (2007, p. 203) is correct to see a connection with Kurdish.

While the masculine wawated form would have had an Arabic origin, speakers could have

understood it as the same morpheme as the Kurdish vocative ending in a bilingual

setting. The absence of any marking on feminine kinship terms perhaps motivated the

borrowing of the Kurdish feminine ending to produce an etymologically mixed paradigm

nearly identical with the Kurdish vocative paradigm.

The Levantine dialects appear to have extended the domain of wawation through

analogy, appending the suffix to the female counterparts of male kinship terms; a similar

extension of nunation occurred in Classical Arabic as Van Putten (2017) convincingly

reconstructs the feminine ending as diptotic in Proto-Arabic.

The Levantine situation may, therefore, reflect a continuation of ancient Nabataean-
type wawation, which survived marginally while the rest of the nominal system shifted—
either through contact or through internal development—to favor the non-wawated

paradigm. The early 6th century CE Arabic inscription from Jebel Usays 5 already demons-

trates that the local Levantine dialects of Arabic had dispensed with wawation on personal

names and nouns; thus, it is already possible at this point that the feature was restricted
to kinship terms. It is not surprising that kinship terms would preserve older layers of

morphology, and so this solution, if correct, would provide a unified analysis of wawation

across Arabic.

To conclude, the linguistic stratum of wawation in the Levantine and northern

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*ṭ*

Classical Arabic: conditioned—following short vowels or consonants: kitāb-ṭ

Ugaritic: conditioned—ṭ = /ṭ/ on nominative singular + fem. pl. nouns

Phoenician: conditioned—ṭ = /ṭ/, nominative + accusative

*ṭa*

Classical Arabic: conditioned—following long vowels and diphthongs: ʿalay-ṭa

Goʾoz: unconditioned—hagarī-ṭa

Ugaritic: conditioned—ṭa = /ṭa/, gen + acc singular, and other nouns; on prepositions

Phoenician: conditioned—ṭa = */ṭa/, genitive nouns

Some contemporary Arabic dialects, most notably those spoken in North Africa, employ the "ṭa" allomorph following certain prepositions: Maghrebian liya “to, for me”; biya “in/by me”, in contrast to normative Classical Arabic ʿl and ʿṭ, respectively. This distribution may in fact not be innovative. Various Quranic reading traditions produce such forms, but perhaps more importantly, the ṭa itself demonstrates that this allomorph was in existence and had a much wider distribution.

Quran 69:19

faʾammā man ʿittiqa kitābahā bi-yamīnī-hi fa-saqīlū hāʾa unu qaʿā kitāb-iyyah

"and whosoever has received his record in his right hand will exclaim—Behold! Read aloud my record"

69:20

ʾinnit ḍanantuʾammī mutāqin ḥisāb-iyyah

“I had thought that I would surely face my doom”

69:28

māʾāqū ʿammī māl-iyyah

“My wealth has not availed me”

In Sūrat al-Hāqqah, the termination iyah, where the final h should be understood as ḥaʾa s-sakt, i.e., a pausal h following a short vowel, is used on nouns that are syntactically nominative (malīyah) and accusative (kitābiyah and hisābiyah). The employment of the ya allomorph in these contexts is certainly motivated by rhyme, but there are other places in the Quran that demonstrate that its conditioning environment was slightly different from normative Arabic. The vocative expression in Quran 12:84, asasī, is read by Ḥafs as yaʾ asafāʾ and by al-Kisāʾī as yaʾ asafāʾ, translated as “woe to me” (lit. O my woe). Q 5:31 attests a similar construction, ʿabūlī, Ḥafs yaʾ waylatā, al-Kisāʾī yaʾ waylātē. The alif maqṣūrah, read by Ḥafs as ā and al-Kisāʾī as ʾ, reflects the outcome of an original triphthong, *yaʾ asafa-ya > yaʾ asafāʾ (Old Hīzāt; al-Kisāʾī) and yaʾ asafa (Ḥafs) (Al-Jallad and van Putten 2017, pp. 113–14). Thus, these expressions preserve a situation where Arabic deployed the ya suffix following a short /a/, the accusative. Finally, in agreement with the modern North African varieties, the first person clitic following the preposition li- is sometimes realized as ya, depending on the reading tradition. Ḥafs reads ʿaša liya, for example, in Q 36:22.

The pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions also attest a different distribution of the -ya allomorph. The Safaitic inscription BES15 799 attests a construction that is identical to the Quranic use of the -ya allomorph in the vocative.6

BES15 799

wgd sfy bny f ṭl-ʾbwy w ḍl ʾḥly

“he found the inscription of Bonayy and was weighed down (by grief) on account of Bonayy and said: woe to me (ḥabla-ya lit. O my woe)”
The use of the -ya allomorph following the short high vowel /i/ is also attested in the pre-Islamic corpus. A Thamudic D inscription from the northern Ḥīgāz attests this allomorph following the preposition bi.7

**UdhThamD 1 = JSTham 213**

ṛbt ʾṣq by [l] kn ’mt ṣkrn
‘There is much longing in me (biya) for Kn the maidservant of ṣkrn.’

Finally, the Dumaitic inscription WDum 3 = WTI 23 attests the -ya allomorph on a noun which is syntactically in the genitive case. Its presence implies that the genitive ending was still productive in this stage of the language.8

**WDum 3; WTI 23**

ḥḏwd Ṣḥy ṣrsm ʾd-n ’l-wwḍ-ḥ
‘O Ruṣaws and Nuhay and ‘Attarsamē, help me in the matter of my wish (wīḍādiya)’

The combination of these facts indicates that the Proto-Arabic distribution of the ū and ya allomorphs of the 1CS genitive pronoun was different from normative Classical Arabic. Rather, its appearance following the accusative in vocatives /a/, and short /I/, following prepositions like li and bi, and the genitive in Dumaitic, indicates a distribution similar to Ugaritic. Thus, we can reconstruct the Proto-Arabic situation as such:

**Nouns**

Nom: *gambar-i*
Gen: *gambar-ya* (Attested: Dumaitic; relics: QCT)
Acc: *gamala-ya* (Relics: vocative in QCT and Safaitic)

**i-vowel prepositions:**

*ʾli-ya
*bi-ya

**Long vowels + diphthongs**

*ʾalay-ya
*ʿalā-ya

In this light, modern vernaculars that exhibit forms such as biya and liya continue the ancient situation, while Classical Arabic is innovative in its generalizing of the -i ending to these propositions. As one reviewer of this paper pointed out to me, the quality of the vowel of the preposition in the Maghrebian varieties suggests that its immediate ancestor was long, liya < *liya. Maghrebian Arabic generally loses etymologically short vowels, except in unstressed function words, where they are reanalyzed as long, e.g., the third masculine plural pronoun ḥāma < ḥum. Thus, an original *liya would have plausibly yielded liya; the same applies to the form biya.

The vocative form may also be attested in some modern dialects. In some Levantine dialects, the expression yalbayc is used in situations of distress. It translates literally as “O my father.” If the expression goes back to *yā ʿabā-yah, with ḥāʾu s-sakt, then it would parallel similar constructions in the Quran and Safaitic.

Ḥāʾu s-sakt must be reconstructed for the ancestor of the forms liya and biya as well. The presence of a final a in these cases is anomalous, as final-short vowels, including a, have generally been lost in the modern vernaculars (Figure 3).

| Proto-West Semitic | Classical Arabic | Egyptian |
|--------------------|-----------------|---------|
| *kotāla | qotāla | ċotal |
| *taghā | taghā | taht |
| *sāmi iya | sāmi ʾiya | samʿ in |

**Figure 3.** Loss of final a in Modern Egyptian.

Thus, the survival of the vowel suggests the presence of a final h, protecting it from apocope. In other words, the antecedent of dialectal biya was not *biya but rather *biyah, as attested in Ṣūrat al-Ḥāqqah.
To conclude, both the distribution and form of the 1CS genitive clitic pronoun in the modern dialects speaks against a Classical Arabic origin, but should rather be connected with phenomena attested marginally in the QCT and in the ancient inscriptions.

4. Relative Pronoun

The relative pronoun *alladī is restricted to southwest Arabia today (Behnstedt 2016, p. 74), but in former times it was much more widely distributed (Holes 2018a, p. 13). It is the primary form attested in Middle Arabic texts, even those that are quite close to the vernacular. It is attested in the Damascus Psalm Fragment as ελλεδι (8th–early 9th c.; Al-Jallad 2020b, p. 26). If this form was common in medieval vernaculars, it has today given way to the virtually pan-Arabic relative pronoun *allī (Stokes 2018). Yet alladī seems to have spread at the expense of an earlier relative pronoun dV:. To the Arabic Grammarians, dV: was characteristic of the dialects of southwest Arabia, where it can still be heard today, and the Najdi dialect of Ṭayyi’ (Rabin 1951, chps. 3 and 14). In the modern dialects, dV-base relatives are common in Southwest Arabia (Behnstedt 2016, p. 74) and in the Maghreb (Aguadé 2018, p. 54). The genitive particles ḏl and ḏl (lit. “that which is for”) in the Qultu dialects and marginally in the Levant also suggest that at one point the relative pronoun of those dialects was a simple dV-base form (Procházka 2018, p. 280; Lentin 2018, p 195).

The relative dV: is attested across the pre-Islamic Arabic Sprachraum (Figure 4)—indeed, the form *alladī has not yet appeared in the pre-Islamic epigraphic record, although its feminine counterpart *allī has been attested once in the Ḥīgāz.

| Script   | Location                           | Form                          |
|----------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Hismaic  | S. Jordan/N.W. Saudi Arabia        | d (ms): ḏā’ (fā)             |
| Safaitic | Syro-Arabian ḍarrāḥ                 | ḏ (ms); ḏā’ ṭā (fā); ḏā’ (mpl) |
| Nabataean | Southern Levant–North Arabia       | ḏā (generalized?)            |
| Dādaniṭ  | Al-‘Ulā NW Arabia                   | ḏ (fā)                       |
| Thamudic D | Medina                              | ḏ (ms)                       |
| Ancient South Arabian musnad        | Qaryat al-Fāw                    | ḏā (mpl)                     |

Figure 4. Distribution of relative pronouns in the epigraphic record; data from Al-Jallad (2018).

In at least Safaitic and Hismaic it seems to inflect for case, gender, and number, with the plural form appearing as ḏā’ /dāwū/ or /dāwī/. Even as far south as Qaryat al-Faw, in the linguistically mixed inscription from the site, the Rbbl bin Ḥf m grave inscription, the plural form is attested as ḏā (Beeston 1979; Al-Jallad 2014). In Safaitic the relative may rarely agree in definiteness with its antecedent, producing ḏā’ /hāddī/. The presence of the dV-base relative pronoun in all other branches of Semitic permits its secure reconstruction to Proto-Arabic, although there is not enough information to determine the details of its inflectional paradigm (Huehnergard 2017, pp. 16–17). This in turn indicates that the *alladī and later *allī forms are innovative, and spread at a later period, similar to ʂāf and bVdā discussed in the introduction.

Since dV: is an archaism it cannot be used to argue for a shared genealogical relationship between the dialects that preserve traces of it. It does, however, demonstrate that these dialects do not descend linearly from Classical Arabic, which had replaced this form with the alladī-type relative. Moreover, its presence throughout pre-Islamic Arabic prevents us from assuming that the dV-base relative pronoun in the modern vernaculars is a result of “South Arabian” influence, as has been previously suggested (Corriente 2007). The relative was not bound to a single geographic area in pre-Islamic times, but was in use from Yemen to Syria. Rather, it was the alladī-type relative that appears to have had a specific geographic distribution, restricted to the Ḥīgāz. Today’s dialect geography reflects a reversal of the pre-Islamic situation. The alladī-type relative, including *allī, has spread at the expense of the older dV-type, which is today restricted to the periphery of the Arabic Sprachraum.
5. Concluding Remarks

The features discussed here are but a small sample of possible Old Arabic relics strewn throughout modern Arabic vernaculars. They nevertheless motivate one to think in terms of a three-dimensional dialect continuum, extending not only geographically but also chronologically. Interdialectal contact, substrate contributions from the pre-Arabic languages of all regions to which Arabic spread, and the heavy superstrate influence of Classical Arabic prevent us from regarding any dialect as a monogenetic descendent of a pre-Islamic variety. Yet there can be no doubt that pre-Islamic phonological and morphological features absent in Classical Arabic contributed to the formation of the modern vernaculars.

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Appendix A

Figure A1. Safaitic Inscription BES15 799 (courtesy OCIANA).

BS 821: l mjyr bn msk bn ‘md bn mlk w wgd sfr bny l tql ‘l bny w ql ḫby w ḏkr rgl f ḏn l’l ḏl rgl

"By Moqayyer son of Māsek son of Mālek and he found the writing of Bonayy and was weighed down by grief for Bonayy and said "O my woe" and he remembered Rāgel and was debased (by grief) for Rāgel"

Commentary:
This text was discovered in the Jordanian Harrah at 32.43341; 37.270460, during the 2015 campaign of the Badia Epigraphic Survey project. The author produced three other Safaitic inscriptions KRS 38, 1885, and 1886, in the same general region.

*wd sfr: “he found the writing”, a common inscriptive genre produced upon the finding of the inscription’s of distant or deceased loved ones.

*tql: “he was weighed down”, cf. Classical Arabic ṭaqula. The verb is only attested in grieving contexts and so should be construed as a metaphor for worry and grief.
respectively. Thus, it is possible that the definite article of the ancestral dialect to both was
ʿAsīrī dialects would appear to share a non-Classical Arabic common ancestor with
this distinct declensional profile.

Notes

1 For a summary and linguistic classification of these texts, see Al-Jallad (2018) and Macdonald (2004).

2 The inscriptions that continue to exhibit a living case system are the En Avdat inscription (see Macdonald’s contribution to Fiema et al. 2015); the inflection of Nabataean theophoric names such as ʿbd ʿibḥ ly / ʿabd-ʿal-baʿli/; and the Jebel Ramm Hismaic
inscription (Macdonald 2018a, 2018b; Al-Jallad 2020a).

3 The text was published on Twitter by its discoverer, mr. Aqla al-Rabiah: https://twitter.com/aqlaalrbiah/status/129386741319
7520896 (accessed on 18 October 2021). A preliminary edition of the text can be found here: https://safaitic.blogspot.com/2021
/06/king-of-ancient-dumat-addumatu.html (accessed on 18 October 2021).

4 The movement from north to south is assured by the chronology of the inscriptions. Wawation of this sort appears to be in
place as early as the 5th c. BCE in the north, while at the same time southwestern Arabia was dominated by the Ancient
South Arabian languages. The pre-Arabic situation in the ʿAsir is so far unclear, but the existence of a number of texts
from the region that defy interpretation indicates considerable linguistic diversity before Arabic dominated the region; see
https://safaitic.blogspot.com/2021/08/more-pre-arabic-texts-from-asir.html (accessed on 18 October 2021). It is unclear when
the process of Arabization began, but the first appearance of Arabic-like features in the inscriptive record dates to the turn
of the era, the same time when groups called ʿrb appear in the inscriptions.

5 This inscription begins with the author’s name ʾr ṭ̄eqm b l n ʾf l-ʾwṣ “I am Ruqaym son of Muʿarrif the Aws-ite”. Wawation
would be expected on both Ruqaym and Mرف according to its normal distribution in the 6th c. Arabic inscriptions and in Nabataean.
On this text, see Macdonald’s contribution to Fiema et al. (2015).

6 This inscription had not been previously edited. See Appendix A for the edition. Note that ʾy only has a consonantal value in
Safaitic and cannot indicate word-final ʿ.

7 This is my interpretation of the text, based on parallels in other Thamudic D inscriptions. The editio princeps differs from my
reading. See Macdonald (2018a, 2018b).

8 Note that matres lectiones are not used in the orthography of the Oasis North Arabian scripts to indicate final long vowels, as
shown with the verb ʿaḏn /ṣāiʿ idū-nī/ “help me”. The final ʿy of the inscription must therefore be consonantal.

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