Michael Macdonald is justly famous for his studies on the inscriptions of Arabia and its adjoining regions and on the wider socio-political significance of these lapidary texts. I have benefitted enormously from his expertise over the years and as a small tribute to him and in recognition of his substantial contribution to the field I present here two little known Arabic texts from the early Islamic period.

1 A Graffito from Khirbat al-Bayḍāʾ, Modern South Syria

The rather fine castle of Khirbat al-Bayḍāʾ (fig. 1) is located in the basalt desert approximately 100 km southeast of Damascus. It lies between the sites of Namara and Jabal Says, both well known for their pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions. In a thorough study of the building Heinz Gaube (1974) argued that it too should be assigned to the pre-Islamic period, most likely constructed for one of the chiefs of the tribe of Ghassan, the most important Arab allies of the Byzantines in the sixth century AD. It was thought to be bereft of epigraphic remains, but in the course of an expedition to Jabal Says in 1999 I discovered an inscription there (fig. 2). It is a graffito rather than a building text, but it is interesting for the fact that it is precisely dated. It is etched onto one of a very large number of broken blocks that are strewn about the lava field on which the castle is built. It was located only about ten metres from the main entrance. Its surface is very rough and this must be borne in mind when approaching the text.

Reading

The second line of the text clearly bears the date: sanat sitt wa-ʿishrīn wa-miʾa, “year one hundred and twenty-six”, which in the era of the Hijra corresponds to AD 743–744. Unfortunately the first line is not so easy to read. It would appear to have an initial bismillāh (“in the name of God”). It is possible that the next word is al-raḥmān, the first part of the standard accompaniment to bismillāh, i.e. al-raḥmān al-raḥīm (“the merciful the compassionate”), but it seems impossible to
read the second part, \textit{al-rahîm}, into the following letters. An alternative would be to read the word after \textit{bismillâh} as \textit{irḥam} (“have mercy on”). This would be a very common way to begin a graffito, the most usual aim of such texts being to solicit God’s indulgence. There are numerous texts on the lip of the crater above the castle of Jabal Says which have exactly this purpose and were inscribed by those spending time there (‘Ushsh 1964). However, this section of the first line after the \textit{bismillâh} eludes sure decipherment.

After a short gap, which ends in what looks like an isolated \textit{rā’} though could just be a mark on the rock, there appear the letters \textit{l-ʾ-q-l-y-m}. If one posits a preceding \textit{aliph} the most obvious reading would be \textit{al-iqlîm} (“the district”). One could link this with the suggested reading of the previous word as \textit{irḥam} and interpret it as a request for God’s mercy upon the district, though I know of no other occurrence of such a sentiment in an inscription. One would rather expect the inscriber to be saying that he was stationed in the district or protected it; it is tempting to read \textit{ḥamā al-iqlîm} (“he defended the district”), which would be appropriate, but would ignore the two letters before the \textit{ḥā’} and would steal the initial \textit{aliph} from \textit{al-iqlîm} (assuming \textit{ḥamā} to be written with \textit{aliph} rather than \textit{aliph maqṣūra}). Another solution would be to assume that we have the usual call for mercy on a person, and here that person has a Greek name beginning with the letter \textit{kappa} or \textit{phi}, which in Arabic usually