LITERACY IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE*

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Introduction

When an extensive literary work, and especially a holy scripture like the Qurʾan, is committed to writing, this appears to presuppose the existence of established writing practices and a minimum of literacy among the community addressed by that scripture. The holy scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, for example, emerged in the cultural centers of Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean, that is, in an area and at a time where the use of writing had been a familiar element of everyday life for centuries. By contrast, the region in which the Qurʾan came into being—namely, western Arabia—does not seem to have been characterized by extensive literary production. But even though archeological evidence for this region, and especially for the sixth century, is sparse, there are indicators of a limited spread of literacy even in this area.

There can be no doubt that the Qurʾan was put into writing under the influence of the Christian (i.e., Syriac, and probably also Ethiopian) and Jewish literary traditions. The Christians and Jews who were present in the urban centers of the Arabian Peninsula must have brought their holy scriptures with them into the region, and liturgical practices in these communities must have involved some use of written documents. A minimum of scribal production in Aramaic (or even Hebrew) among these communities can thus safely be assumed, even though this supposition still awaits archeological confirmation. Yet since literary production of this kind was imported from Syria-Palestine and did not have a properly Arabian origin, it will not be pursued any further within the scope of this contribution.1 Rather, the present

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* This paper is an abbreviated version of a more extensive paper published in German (Stein, “Stein vs. Holz”).—I am very indebted to Michael C. A. Macdonald (Oxford) for having read a draft of the manuscript.

1 These communities were dependent on the literary culture of the Hellenistic world, which is largely different from the genuinely Arabian one, and in particular
article will focus on the question of a genuinely Arabian culture of writing, that is, one developed within the Arabian Peninsula itself and existing prior to, or contemporary with, those writing traditions imported from outside. It should be noted that “Arabian” in this context is used as a purely geographical term rather than an ethnic or linguistic one, comprising all the cultures of the Peninsula (except for the regions in the far north and northwest, which were subject to strong Hellenistic influences). Bearing in mind the explicit self-classification of the Qurʾan as “Arabic,” I will therefore ask to what extent the inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia were able to express and receive their mother tongues by means of script.

For this purpose, the available material sources documenting the use of writing will be surveyed and classified with respect to their distribution and their importance within public and private social life. Subsequently, the question of literacy in the particular societies will be discussed. This procedure fits nicely under three questions: 1. Which materials were written upon? 2. What was written? 3. Who did the writing? Due to the fact that the archeological exploration of the Arabian Peninsula is as yet rather scanty, the following analysis will naturally be restricted to conclusions that will have to be critically reviewed once new sources become available. Nevertheless, an exhaustive examination of the epigraphic material presently known promises to yield important insights for the study of the genesis of the Qurʾan.

The following statements will concentrate exclusively on firsthand epigraphic material, while later Islamic accounts of the topic will be referred to only if they overlap with the epigraphic evidence (for a discussion of the Islamic sources in connection with the Qurʾan, see Gregor Schoeler’s contribution to this volume). Due to my concentra-

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2 As the examples of the Nabateans and the Amīr (in Qaryat al-Fāw, Najrān and the Yemenite Jawf) show, members of ethnically “Arab” tribes could assimilate to a neighboring sedentary culture and take over its way of life, including the use of writing. While the Nabatean script was borrowed from older non-Arabic (i.e., Aramaic) traditions, the script used by the Amīr was a genuinely South Arabian development.

3 The only recent attempt at providing an overview synthesizing both pre-Islamic epigraphy and traditional “Arabic studies” (études arabes) was undertaken by Robin, “Inscriptions.” However, his focus is mainly on linguistics and research history, while the material aspects of writing are only marginally touched upon.