What Are Those Few Dots For?

Thoughts on the Orthography of the Qurra Papyri (709-710), the Khurasan Parchments (755-777) and the Inscription of the Jerusalem Dome of the Rock (692)

Andreas Kaplony

Universität Zürich
Orientalisches Seminar

Introduction

“What are those few dots for?” The question seems to be rather odd. Are not dots meant to define an ambiguous rasm َ-kitāb which might be read as َ-kuntu or َ-katabtu? The same way we use vowel signs to distinguish between َ-katabta and َ-katabtu? The approach we intuitively take is one of reading Arabic in three layers. A first layer would be the one of the most ambiguous


© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2008

DOI: 10.1163/157005808X289331
rasm of undotted characters, like e.g. ﻷ kitāb/kataba/kuntu/kunta.² To this rasm, we add dots, to have a second layer with unambiguous characters but no vowel signs: كَتَبَ/kataba vs. كَتْنَتَ/kuntu/kunta. To this, again, we add vowel signs, to get a third layer, the seemingly unambiguous dotted and vocalized characters: كَتَابَ/kataba vs. كَبَ/kitāb. In phrases, we find a layer zero where non-connecting characters mark the word end, like ﻓَﺎ-ﻱ ﻦٰﺪَأ fa-inna hišāma vs. ﻓَﺎ-ﻱ ﻦٰ-ﻤَأ fa-innahu sāma.³ The whole system seems to be a kind of multi-layered shorthand, a tool of well-trained scribes to make writing as easy and quick as possible.

But things are not as simple as that. Since the spread of print culture in the Middle East, i.e. since the second half of the 19th century, our second layer has become the standard layer and texts are almost completely written with dots, resembling the Latin script’s consonants and long vowels, sometimes with a few vowel signs added. Quotations from the Koran and poetry as well as school books are written in our third layer, i.e. fully dotted with vowel signs added. Korans usually even add a system of recitation markers—yet another, fourth layer.

Things were different in the times of scribal culture.⁴ Scribes did not sprinkle their texts with dots, let alone vowel signs, but used them reluctantly—the degree of reluctance seems to have been a matter of changing fashions. In our three main corpora (see below), the same word occurs with and without dots between one out of seven and one out of ten times.

But what where those few dots for? A closer look reveals that they were only rarely added to define the ambiguous rasm of a given word, to know kitāb from kuntu, the way we today use vowel signs to distinguish katabtu from katabta.⁵ There was almost no need for that, as well-trained scribes definitely knew that, if found as part of هْدَا kitābu (min . . .) “This is a writ (of . . .)” (P.Heid.Arab. I 5.2; 6.3; a.3, etc.), while with ﻷ-ﻳْد كَبَ كَبَ كَبَ كَبَ كَبَ كَبَ كَبَ كَبَ كَبَ كَا-نَيٰ-ٰا fa-innahu sāma. The needs of the small elite of professional scribes, all

² In the Qurra papyri, كَبَ stands in almost all instances (over 60 tokens) for kitāb (e.g., P.Heid.Arab. I 5.2; 6.3; a.3), but also for kataba (P.BeckerPapyrusstudien.8; P.Cair.Arab. 151 r.7; 151 r.16), kuntu (P.Heid.Arab. I 3.6; P.Qurra 4.19), and kunta (P.Cair.Arab. 147.9).

³ ﻓَﺎ-ﻱ ﻦٰ-ﻤَأ—There is next to no research on connecting characters, etc. (Fischer 1992, 137; Déroche 2000, 233), but see Hirschfeld 1919-1920, 165.

⁴ For the difference between scribe and print culture, see Roper 1995.

⁵ Grohmann 1952, 83; Rāg̩ib 1991a, 16 both emphasize that diacritical dots often occur with almost unambiguous words and are absent where we really miss them. Abbott 1972, 9 also stresses the random use of diacritical dots and vowel signs.

⁶ Quite similarly, Arabic inscriptions are almost unreadable for those who need to decipher them word by word, whereas for the educated a few formulas are sufficient to fill in the parts in