

SOME NOTES ON SOUTH SAFAITIC

by
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Introduction

As can be seen from thousands of inscriptions and some other sources, the Arabian peninsula is the home of a great many languages and dialects. These can conveniently be classified through the use of only one criterion, which has turned out to be of special significance, i.e., the definite article. One possible distinction can be gained from the position of the definite article. Languages with suffixation belong to the Old South Arabian type, recently called Sayhadic;¹ languages showing a prefixed article belong to the North Arabian type.

According to the elements used, the following groups of the North Arabian languages can be classified further.²

North Arabic, with the article *ha(n)*- which comprises all varieties of Old North Arabic, i.e., Safaitic, Thamudic, etc.,

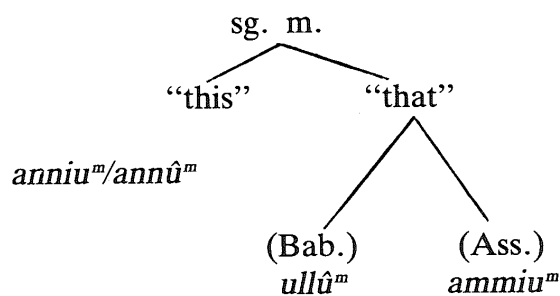
Central Arabic, with the article (')*al*- to which Classical Arabic belongs,

West Arabic, with the article (')*am*-, a feature which has been reported, e.g., for the Yemenite dialect.³

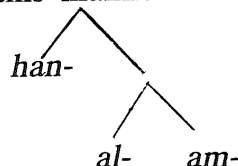
It is obvious that the articles in question can be derived from demonstrative elements. This process could be traced up to modern dialects, cf. modern *hal-beet* "this house" and *has-suu* "this bazaar"⁴

with classical *haada* 'l-bait resp. *haada* 's-suuq,⁵ if it turns out that this *hal*- should not contain a demonstrative particle *haa* (without *ḏ*.)⁶

It would appear worth mentioning in this context that relevant demonstrative elements with *n*, *l*, and *m*, resp., are already found in Akkadian, in which a demonstrative pronoun with *n* is distinguished from a demonstrative pronoun with *l* or *m* (according to the dialect) in a way equivalent to our distinction between "this" and "that".⁷



In following this scheme, we are now able to classify the North Arabian groups in this manner:



If we continue by using the form of the article as a criterion of classification, we

¹ This paper was read at the Fourth International Conference on the History of Bilad al-Sham that took place in Amman, October 1983.

A.F.L. Beeston, *Languages of Pre-Islamic Arabia*, *Arabica* 28 (1981). p. 178-186.

² For a somehow different classification cf. Beeston l.c.

³ C. Rabin, *Ancient West Arabian*, London, 1951; p. 34. with further references. The existence of the (')*am*- article in the Tayyi' dialect (*op. cit.*, p. 205) leads him to consider it as a genuine feature of West Arabic, although the dialects of this region exhibit a "heavy dominance of the h(n) article"

(Beeston, *Languages* p. 185).

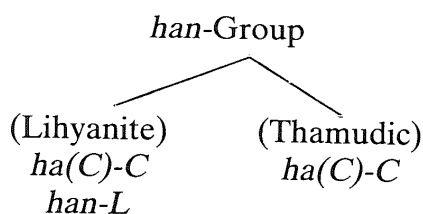
⁴ H. Grotzfeld, *Syrisch-arabische Grammatik*, Wiesbaden, 1965, p. 21.

⁵ Cf. C. Brockelmann, *Grundriß der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen*, vol. 1, Berlin, 1908, p. 318.

⁶ As demonstrated by W. Fischer, *Die demonstrativen Bildungen der neuarabischen Dialekte*, 's-Gravenhage, 1959, p. 47.

⁷ W. von Soden, *Grundriß der akkadischen Grammatik*, Rome, 1952, p. 46-47, cf. already Brockelmann, *Grundriß* p. 316-317.

shall arrive at the following division of the *han*-group. In one branch, the article is retained only before laryngals; in the other one, there are no visible traces of *n* left:



The first branch is represented by the Lihyanite inscriptions, the second by the great bulk of Thamudic and Safaitic inscriptions whose classification, according to script, character cast, and language style, can be called the “greatest unsolved problem of Arabic epigraphy”.⁸ One group of these inscriptions, first found in the South Syrian Şafâ’ and later also in adjacent areas of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, can clearly be separated from the others because of its characters and its organization.

The remaining Old North Arabic inscriptions are usually labelled “Thamudic”, a general term for all inscriptions that have not been characterized in a positive manner. Indeed, the division of the “Thamudic” inscriptions into six different groups, as done by F.V. Winnett,⁹ has been a great step forward in that it has made further progress possible.

Although Winnett has already detected some similarities between his Thamudic E, later on dubbed Tabuki,¹⁰ and Safaitic,¹¹ it is only recently that these connecting lines have been stressed, which does not mean, however, to imply the existence of a homogeneous group.¹² In order to emphasize the cultural unity with Safaitic, inscriptions of the Tabuki type which, in script and language, show specific Safaitic traits, i.e., the marked affiliation and the three-part structure, are called

South Safaitic.¹³

It is a peculiarity of some Southern texts that the verb *w \bar{t} m* is used instead of *wgm* “to mourn”, which was already noted by G. L. Harding and E. Littmann in their “Some Thamudic Inscriptions”,¹⁴ which contains the most extensive group of South Safaitic texts published to date. This has just been successfully investigated by E.A. Knauf¹⁵ who has thus helped to clear the way for some further observations. E.A. Knauf suggested that the letter ç , which had so far been identified as \bar{t} , be read in these texts as *g*, cf., e.g., the reading of the verb *wgm* and the personal names *'gmc*, *grm*, *grf*, *gml* and *gmhr* which could not be interpreted in a straight forward way when reading \bar{t} instead of *g*.

This unusual orthography can be explained by the historical merging of *t*, and \bar{t} in \bar{t} , which made the letter \bar{t} available for the use of *g* which must be assumed to have altered its phonetic nature. It appears appropriate to give this matter some more consideration. South Safaitic is phonemically characterized by having lost its interdental (affricate →) fricative series which merged with the dental stop series.

(a) \bar{t} merged with *t*, as can be seen from words with etymological \bar{t} that are written with *t*, as (TIJ 280) *t'r*, instead of $\bar{t}'r$, and (TIJ 105) *tmd*, instead of $\bar{t}md$ ¹⁶), thus leaving the now-obsolete letter \bar{t} for other purposes.

(b) Now if \bar{d} did merge with *d* in the same way, we may expect to find some instances of *d* for etymological \bar{d} . There are, however, only some cases of \bar{d} for *d*, as in (TIJ 490) *z \bar{d}* , instead of *zd*, and (TIJ 69) *y \bar{d} c*, instead of *yc*.¹⁷ This seems to indicate that the letter \bar{d} , currently used in phrases with *d \bar{k} r* ‘to remember’ and *d \bar{t} -l* ‘of the family/tribe of’, represents both \bar{d} and *d*. The rare instances of written \bar{d} , as in (TIJ

⁸ F. V. Winnett, *A Study of the Lihyanite and Thamudic Inscriptions*, Toronto, 1937, p. 20.

⁹ Winnett, *Study*.

¹⁰ F. V. Winnett and W. L. Reed, *Ancient Records from North Arabia*, Toronto, 1970, p. 70.

¹¹ E.g., Winnett, *Study*, p. 49, 53.

¹² V.A. Clark, Three Safaitic Stones from Jordan, *ADAJ*, XXIV (1980), p. 128.

¹³ Cf. R. M. Voigt, Einige altnordarabische Inschriften, *ZDPV* 97 (1981), p. 179.

¹⁴ I.e., *Some Thamudic Inscriptions from the Hashemite Kingdom of the Jordan*, Leiden, 1952, abbreviated as *TIJ*.

¹⁵ Südsafaitisch, *ADAJ*, XXVII (1983), p. 587-596.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.* § 2.3.1.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.* § 2.3.2.

58) *wd*, (TIJ 198) *scd*, and (TIJ 494) *h_hdn*¹⁸, should then be seen as cases of historical orthography.

(c) As to the third member of the interdental series, the emphatic *z*, South Safaitic, as the ‘Thamudic’ scripts in general, but contrary to North Safaitic, did not develop a specific character for it. At least in script., *z* merged with the corresponding voiced emphatic dental (*d*), not with its voiceless dental counterpart (*t*), as we may expect from Aramaic. Cf. the following personal names containing *d* instead of etymological *z*:

(WIJ 349) *cdmn*, with root *czm*.

(WIJ 352) *dnt*, with root *znn*.

In other personal names, it is not quite clear whether South Safaitic *d* represents North Safaitic *d* or *z*, as it may be in (WIJ 58) *gd*, for which different roots can be given.

The loss of the three interdental fricatives, as demonstrated above, may be summarized in the following scheme, which shows the phonological develop-

of transition that has been dated to the first half of this millennium.²¹ The evidence provided by South Safaitic shows, however, that there may have been antecedents in other places and dialects at different times.

In addition to the merger of the interdental fricatives with the dental plosives yet another sound change is rather remarkable for the makeup of the South Safaitic phonological system, i.e., the palatalization of *g*. This sound has changed neither to *y* [*j*]²² nor to *ǰ* [*dž*], but to *ž*. If *g* had been pronounced as *ǰ*, one would have to explain why a new character should have been invented only to designate a palatalized variant. If *g* had been merged totally with *y*, we should expect some writings of *y* for etymological *g* and *y* are usually kept apart could not be explained by historical orthography. Historical orthography is based on the assumption that characters which are widely used tend to be preserved. In our case, another character has been used to indicate a new sound develop-

	(Voiceless)	(Voiced)	
(dental)	<i>t</i> <i>ṭ</i>	<i>d</i> <i>ḍ</i>	
	↑	↑ ↑	
(interdental)	<i>t̥</i>	<i>z</i> <i>d̥</i>	}
		(fricative)	
(alveolar)	<i>š/</i> <i>s</i> <i>š</i>	<i>z</i>	}
		(‘emphatic’)	
			}
			(coronal)

ment from Proto-Arabic to South Safaitic:

It is striking that this development has its analogy in many modern Arabic dialects, e.g., the Meccan¹⁹ and some Mesopotamian dialects.²⁰ For other dialects with a four-term sibilant system (*s š z ẓ*) this development represents a necessary stage

ment.

The evolution of *g* to *ž* fits well into the phonological system of South Safaitic. One of its characteristics is a strong relevance of voice. With due regard to this we are able to present the resulting consonantal system as follows:

¹⁸ Cf. the remark in *TIJ* 494 that *d* has here a ‘curious form’ that may be accounted for by the fact that it is rarely used.

¹⁹ G. Schreiber, *Der arabische Dialekt von Mekka*, Freiburg i.Br., 1971, p. 6.

²⁰ O. Jastrow, *Die mesopotamisch-arabischen q’l-tu-*

Dialekte, vol. 1, Wiesbaden, 1978, p. 34.

²¹ I. Garbell, Remarks on the Historical Phonology of an East Mediterranean Arabic Dialect, *Word* 14 (1958), p. 313.

²² E. A. Knauf, *Südsafaitisch* § 2.3.3.

	(voiceless) (voiced)		
(labial)	<i>f</i>	<i>b</i>	
(dental)	<i>f</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i> } <i>d</i> }
(alveolar)	<i>f</i> }	<i>s</i> <i>š</i>	<i>z</i> } — } <i>ž</i> ←
(palato-alveolar)	<i>š</i>	<i>ž</i>	
(velar)	<i>k</i>	<i>q</i> (<i>g</i>)	
(uvular)	<i>ħ</i>	<i>ġ</i>	
(pharyngal)	<i>ħ</i>	<i>c</i>	

As can be seen from this chart, *g* has changed its position from the voiced member of the velar series to the voiced member of a new-arising palatal series. i.e., the isolated palato-alveolar *š* has been extended to a two-term series (*š ž*) by

providing its voiced counterpart from another series (cf. arrow).

A further argument for rendering the North Safaitic character *t* in South Safaitic as *ž* may be derived from its shape. South Safaitic *ž* resembles a *z* modified on the model of *y*.²³



These observations would be particularly rewarding if they would help to stimulate further research, with the tendency to go beyond the merely factual information that can be obtained from inscriptions such as the ones discussed above.

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²³ Cf. the modification of *z* in Persian, Turkish etc. to designate the *ž* sound.