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# South Arabian Loanwords

Pre-Islamic Arabia was far from immune from cultural and linguistic influences exerted by two prestigious cultural centers, namely the Fertile Crescent in the north and the Yemen in the south (Beeston 1981:180). The material civilization of the Yemenite kingdoms of Saba', Ma'īn, Qatabān, and Ḥadramawt, renowned for their achievements in agriculture, administration, architecture, and commerce, undoubtedly attracted the Arabs' attention. Robin (1991–1993:72, 77) reports that, as early as the 6th century B.C.E., Arab nomads are mentioned in a Minean inscription, and that by the 2nd century B.C.E. a number of Arabs had settled in the Yemenite heartland. Moreover, for centuries before the beginning of the Common Era, the incense trade had brought South Arabian caravaneers traveling across Arabia in direct contact with the Arabs (Rabin 1984:126). Conflict between the Sabeans and the Arabs reached its climax in the mid-2nd century C.E., but shortly after, during the 3rd century C.E., the fighting skills of Arab Bedouin were sought by various kingdoms and their allies. Such recourse to Arab auxiliaries greatly enhanced the Arab penetration in the Yemen and integration into South Arabian society. This is confirmed by a number of hybrid inscriptions composed in Sabean mixed with elements of Arabic. After the expulsion of the Abyssinians, toward the end of the 3rd century, from western Yemen, the Himyarites and their Kinda (Arab) auxiliaries ruled supreme. Beginning in 525 C.E., vast areas of South Arabia again became an Abyssinian protectorate, for about fifty years. By this time, the South Arabian kingdoms were in an advanced state of decline (Rippin 1990:155–156), and a number of tribes migrated toward the center of the Arabian Peninsula. By the end of the 6th century, most of eastern Yemen was in the hands of Arab nomads, and during the first years of the Islamic era, the Hamdān confederation represented what remained of the ancient South Arabian tribes.

The adoption by the Arabs of features of South Arabian cultural models inevitably resulted in borrowing the terminology related to these models. Ancient (or Epigraphic) South Arabian, attested as early as the beginning of the 1st millennium B.C.E., comprised the following closely related Semitic languages: Sabean, Minean, Qatabanian, and Hadramitic (Kogan a.o. 1997:220–221). Given that South Arabian and Arabic are genetically related, sharing many inherited linguistic features, it is an arduous task to extricate loanwords from the cognate material. The criteria outlined by Militarev and Kogan (2000:l–lvii) can surely help one to avoid pitfalls. Medieval Muslim philologers and exegetes engaged in unending polemics concerning the presence of foreign elements in the *Qur'ān* in particular, and in Arabic in general (Kopf 1956:40–45; az-Zubaydī 1994). Schall (1982:144–146) reports that some loanwords which had penetrated the Arabic lexicon during pre-Islamic times did so only transitorily and were soon forgotten, causing much confusion in medieval Muslim philological circles. Baalbaki (1983:124) acknowledges these scholars' contribution to the comparative study of Arabic. Nevertheless, they lacked knowledge about South Arabian, to such an extent that even authors like al-Hamdānī (d. 334/946) and Ibn an-Nadīm (d. 380/990), of South Arabian extraction themselves, had only an imperfect notion of the subject. Rippin (1990:160–161) states that the latter could not distinguish between → Ḥimyaritic and South Arabian, and both are considered unreliable by modern standards of scholarship.

The earliest exegetes of the 1st century A.H. acknowledged the existence of loans in Qur'ānic Arabic (Versteegh 1993:88–89). Pious Muslim scholars such as aš-Šāfi'ī (d. 205/820) would not subscribe to anything foreign in the *Qur'ān*, and suspected that the Šu'ūbiyya movement was behind such efforts to trace as many foreign elements in Arabic as possible (Kopf 1976:257–258). Others, like aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 311/923) and as-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), sought to strike a middle course in this debate.

In Jeffery's (1938) monograph on approximately 322 loanwords in the *Qur'ān*, loanwords originating in Ethiopic and South Arabian constitute about 13 percent of his list, with

the Ethiopic elements outnumbering the South Arabian ones (Zammit 2002:57–60). Indeed, the latter are not very numerous, and it cannot be otherwise, given the limited time frame during which they were introduced into Arabic, the fragmentary nature of South Arabian linguistic evidence (Ullendorff 1956:198), its restricted subject matter, and the possible contamination from Ḥimyaritic. South Arabian loanwords reached Arabic via a number of channels of diffusion: (i) directly from Yemen: Arabic *baʿīr* 'camel', *baġl* 'mule' (South Arabian *bġl*; Ethiopic *baql*), *baliya* 'to be consumed [a corpse]', *jazama* 'to swear an oath', *ḥiṣn* 'fortress', *Sabaʾ* [name of a country], *safīna* 'ship', *ʿarim* name of Saba''s inundation, *fulk* 'ship', *yaġūṯ* [name of a particular idol], *yahūd* 'Jews'; (ii) loans attested in South Arabian and Ethiopic, which could have reached Arabic directly from South Arabian: Arabic *burhān* 'evident proof', *tubbaʿ* [title of Himyarite kings], *ḥizb* 'a party, sect', *xayma* 'a tent', *širk* 'associating anyone with God', *ṣuḥuf* 'pages of writing', *muṣḥaf* 'codex of the *Qurʾān*', *ṣarḥ* 'tower', *waṯn* 'idol', *fatḥ* 'judgment, decision', *Miṣr* 'Egypt', *tārīx* 'date' (South Arabian *wrx* 'month; date'), *wariq* 'silver; silver coins'; (iii) probable South Arabian loans: *ḥamida* 'to praise', *ʾasāṭīr* 'fables, tales'; (iv) South Arabian loans penetrating Arabic via Ḥimyaritic: Arabic *jafn* 'vine', *waṯaba* 'to sit'; (v) loanwords entering Arabic from other languages via South Arabian: a. from Aramaic sources (Ryckmans 1975:461–462): Arabic *bīʿa* 'church' (< Syriac); *ar-raḥmān* 'the Merciful', *rūḥ al-qudus* 'Holy Spirit', *masjid* 'mosque' (< 'sanctuary'), *ṣalawāt* 'prayers; places of worship', *qurbān* 'sacrifice, offering', *qissīs* 'priest', *kaffara* 'to expiate', and, very likely, also *saṭara* 'to write' and *ṣūra* 'form, picture'; b. from the pre-Semitic substratum in Akkadian and other Semitic languages (Schall 1982:146): *wayn* 'grapes [black or white]; wine'; and (vi) loans, such as *baʿal* 'Baʿal', whose origins are equally contended by the Aramaean North and South Arabian.

South Arabian, attested exclusively in consonantal inscriptions, and Arabic phonologies have much in common in their consonantal segments, and therefore South Arabian loans underwent few phonological adaptations. Furthermore, these loanwords needed very little, if any, morphological adaptation for full assimilation with Arabic patterns. Given that most South Arabian loans are nouns, it is difficult to make any comments of a syntactic nature. Semantically, the religious terms reflecting the transition from paganism to Judaism and Christianity (second half of the 4th century C.E. onward) are very conspicuous. Next in importance are loans reflecting material culture.

South Arabian influence is also felt in ancient Arabic onomastics, but the advent of Islam, signaling a break with the pagan past, left little scope for the propagation of the old names, including theophoric ones ending with *-īl*, like *šuraḥbīl, šarāḥīl*, which were perhaps borrowed from South Arabia (Corriente 1976:97–98).

The decline of the South Arabian languages and the subsequent emergence of Arabic inevitably led to the assimilation by Yemenite Arabic dialects of South Arabian elements (Beeston 1981:180). Future research will certainly identify a greater number of South Arabian loanwords in Arabic which were previously derived from other languages.

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## South Arabian, Modern

The Modern South Arabian languages (Johnstone 1977, 1981, 1987; Leslau 1938, Lonnet 1994), which are still spoken, constitute the substratum for Arabic in the southern part of the Peninsula, as they did for Ancient South Arabian. Their relationship with Arabic has not always been the same, depending on historical circumstances, and in particular it is noteworthy that mere occasional contacts with rival Arabic tribes did not produce the same linguistic result as the inexorable increase in the cultural weight of the language of Islam.

The Modern South Arabian language family was shaped by two historical events: the west-east split – doubtless a response to the settling of the ancient South Arabian kingdoms – and the migration of a group belonging to the eastern branch toward Soqotra Island. Western Modern South Arabian, i.e. Mehri (*mähri*), is deeply marked by continuous contact, over more than three thousand years, with the languages of the ruling communities, first Ancient South Arabian, then Arabic. Eastern Modern South Arabian, continental Jibbali (*jibbāli*) and insular Soqotri (*suquṭri*), developed well away from these influences, in its remote geographical location. This picture became more complicated a few (six?) centuries ago, as Mehri tribes coming from the west seized Dhofar, the eastern zone of the continental Modern South Arabian-speaking area, and adopted the language of the subdued populations (Jibbali), except for two minorities that acquired the language of their conquerors: the groups which now speak Harsusi (*ḥarsūsi*) and Bathari (*baṭḥari*) – both languages being therefore dialects of Mehri. From this outline, one can draw the following broad conclusions: the westernmost Mehri dialects in Yemen have been rather deeply altered by the contact with Arabic, while Dhofari dialects have been much less so. Among the ruling (Mehri) tribes, the Əḥklo' (Jibbali name) or Qarā (Mehri name), Jibbali is marked by Arabic to a limited extent only, and even less among the nontribal dependent groups, the Śḥäro' or Gəblo'. The most remote dialects of Soqotri, in the high mountains, almost completely escaped the influence of Arabic, which was not possible for coastal dialects. Moreover, it is probable that Arab tribal factions from the Yemenite highlands migrated to Soqotra, where they acquired the Soqotri language but without losing Arabic.

The Modern South Arabian-speaking communities may individually have close relationships with Arabic-speaking communities: such is the case of the Ḥarāsīs, whose language contains quite an important Arabic element and presents symptoms of extinction. It is also the case of the inhabitants of 'Abd-el-Kūrī, a small island close to Soqotra, who are in regular and exclusive contact with certain (Arabic-speaking) villages of Hadramawt, to such an extent that their dialect has evolved in a very peculiar way under the influence of Arabic. It remains to say a word about Baṭḥari, which is becoming extinct under the pressure of Jibbali as much as under that of Arabic, and about Hobyot (*hawbyōt*), a very well preserved language within a small area on the border of Dhofar and Mahra, deeply marked by Mehri and Jibbali and hardly by Arabic.

In modern times, a new wave of borrowings from Arabic has its origin in modernity itself. The states of Yemen and Oman are using Arabic in an effort to strengthen their authority, settle the nomads, and support centralized – therefore Arabicized – economic development. These factors do not favor the survival of local cultural identities; furthermore, the modern means of language circulation (e.g. radio, television, and cassette tapes) are almost entirely dedicated to Arabic.

Multilingualism is standard among Modern South Arabian speakers, who nearly all speak