

Origins and Development of Arabic Script

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We can trace the origin of Arabic Script to the history of the Canaanite-Phoenician alphabet of 22 characters, which dates back to around the 14th century BC. Arabic Script evolved from the Nabataean Aramaic script. It has been used since the 4th century AD, but the earliest document, an inscription in Arabic, Syriac and Greek, dates back to 512 AD.¹ The Nabataeans wrote with a highly cursive alphabet that would eventually evolve into the Arabic alphabet. The Nabataeans endured until the year 106 AD, when the Romans conquered them. As the Roman alphabet was evolving from the Phoenician to the Hebrew to the Early Greek, so to was Arabic evolving from Aramaic.

There are two main types of written Arabic:

1. **Classical Arabic** - the language of the Qur'an and classical literature. It differs from Modern Standard Arabic mainly in style and vocabulary, some of which is archaic. All Muslims are expected to recite the Qur'an in the original language, however many rely on translations in order to understand the text.
2. **Modern Standard Arabic** - the universal language of the Arabic-speaking world, which is understood by all Arabic speakers. It is the language of the vast majority of written material and of formal TV shows, lectures, etc.
 - Letters that can be joined are always joined in both hand-written and printed Arabic. The only exceptions to this rule are crossword puzzles and signs in which the script is written vertically.
 - The long vowels /a:/, /i:/ and /u:/ are represented by the letters 'alif, yā' and wāw respectively.²

The use of diamond shaped vowel diacritics placed above certain characters is used to differentiate ambiguities in letter, tone and dialect. I find this similar to the western world's use of special characters such as our umlaut diacritic – “ ”.

Generally speaking, there are two variants to the Arabic alphabet: Kufic and Naskhi. The Kufic script is angular, which was most likely a product of inscribing on hard surfaces such as wood or stone, while the Naskhi script is much more cursive.³ I find the rigid vertical form of our Old Style Capitals similar to Kufic script; most likely due to the limitation of tools and writing surfaces at that time. As Kufic script was used for the earliest copies of the Qu'ran, Black Letter was used for the 42-line Manzarin Bible. The Naskhi script seems to have evolved much in the same way as our italic script.

Just as early forms of Goudy/Textura were used in religious documents like the Bible, so were early forms of Aramaic Hebrew used in the Qu'ran. There is an interesting dialectic between the two forms: I would argue on a broad sense that our Gothic is inversely proportional to Nabataean Aramaic. And that the differences between Roman Script and Arabic script maintain these differences. Gothic/Roman is rigid and vertical. Aramaic/Arabic is flowing and cursive. Gothic is all Capitals. Aramaic is all lowercase. Gothic/Roman reads left to right. Arabic reads right to left. What could all this mean?

'The distinctions between right and left have been profoundly meaningful--imbued with moral and religious meaning—in societies throughout history. Our preoccupation with laterality may originate in our asymmetrical bodies, which emerged from 550 million years of asymmetric vertebrate evolution,

Right Hand, Left Hand, *The Origins of Asymmetry in Brains, Bodies, Atoms and Cultures*, Chris McManus

Given the current state of affairs in the Middle East, I find it fascinating how differences rooted in the very symbols and fonts of our ancient religious texts reflect, fundamentally, on the political and religious differences in the world today.

¹ Omniglot.com/writing/Arabic.htm

² Omniglot.com/writing/Arabic.htm

³ Ancientscripts.com

