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Araştırma Notu / Research Note

A Map and List of the Monotheistic Inscriptions of Arabia, 400–600 CE

Ilkka Lindstedt*

In this research note, I list and briefly comment on rock inscriptions documented from Saudi Arabia that stem from circa 400–600 CE, a crucial period for understanding and interpreting the life and mission of the Prophet Muhammad (570–632 CE). The epigraphic corpus has been growing in recent years, thanks to the important work of epigraphists working in the region. Strikingly, based on the inscriptions discovered so far, all of the texts belonging to the period 400–600 CE are monotheistic.[1]

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1 Fortunately, the epigraphic corpus of late antique Arabia -a growing set of evidence- can be, for the most part, digitally accessible. The Ancient South Arabian material can be accessed at http://dasi.cnr.it (*Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions*, ed. A. Avanzini), while the late Nabataean and Paleo-Arabic material can be found at https://diconab.huma-num.fr/ (*The Digital Corpus of the Nabataean and Developing Arabic Inscriptions*, ed. L. Nehmé). The locations of the inscriptions in the map are based on these databases as well as studies such as Ahmad Al-Jallad and Hythem Sidky, "A Paleo-Arabic Inscription on a Route North of Ṭāʾif," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 33, no. 1 (November 2022): 202–15, https://doi.org/10.1111/aae.12203; Ahmad Al-Jallad and Hythem Sidky, "A Paleo-Arabic Inscription of a Companion of Muhammad?," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 83, no. 1 (2024): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1086/729531.

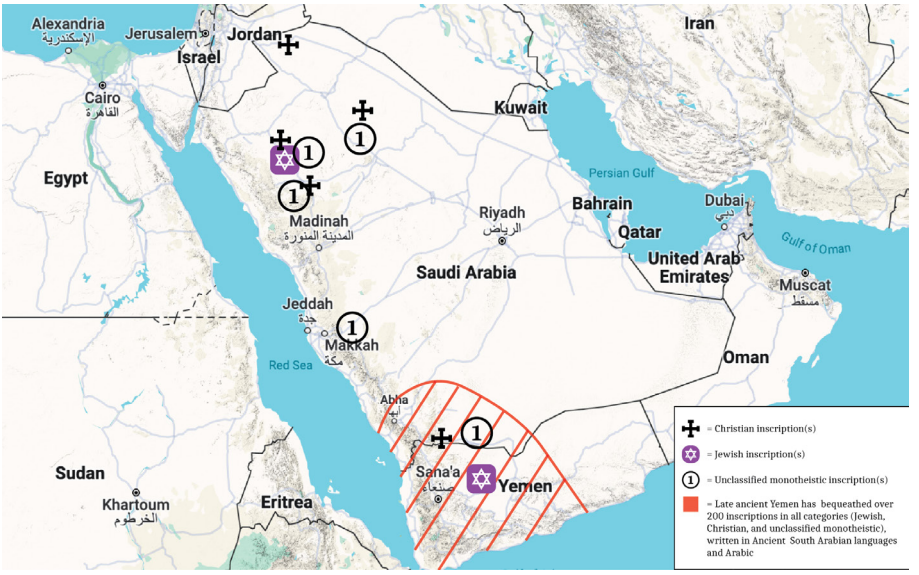


Figure: A map showing the inscriptions dated to 400–600 CE (a burgeoning corpus) found in modern Saudi Arabia and Yemen, published in academic outlets, including digital databases run by scholars. No polytheistic inscriptions have been found from this period so far. Map background: Google Maps. The locations shown on the map above are indicative rather than exact; a symbol may refer to a number of inscriptions, not just a single text. Jordan has also bequeathed a number of Christian inscriptions for this era, but they are not included in the map.

The monotheistic nature of the inscriptions stands in marked contrast to the period before 400 CE, or thereabouts, when the majority of those Arabian inscriptions containing religious language were polytheistic or, if they mentioned only one divinity, that god was a "pagan" god, such as Allāt.[2] In the inscriptions written between 400–600 CE, the One God (and Him only) appears as the aim of worship. He is referred to, in Arabic, as *al-Rabb*, *Allāh*, or *al-Ilāh*. While this does not necessarily mean that there were no polytheists around on the eve of Islam, the inscriptions do suggest, in my opinion, that they were probably in the minority rather than the majority. Another important conclusion of the burgeoning epigraphic corpus dated or datable to 400–600 CE is that many Arabians could read and write during pre-Islamic times.

2 For important studies on the Nabataean and Safaitic inscriptions dated to before 400 CE, see Laïla Nehmé, "Epigraphy on the Edges of the Roman Empire: A Study of the Nabataean Inscriptions and Related Material from the Darb al-Bakrah, Saudi Arabia, 1st–5th Century AD, Volume 1: Text & Illustrations" (Habilitation thesis, EPHE, Paris, 2013); Ahmad Al-Jallad, *The Religion and Rituals of the Nomads of Pre-Islamic Arabia: A Reconstruction Based on the Safaitic Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004504271. Naturally, Jewish and (possibly) Christian presence in the region predates the year 400 CE – in the case of the former, by centuries.

In a monograph that is open access, I have treated some of the pertinent inscriptions (in particular, those recorded until 2022). Since then, a number of new inscriptions have come to light, and these are reflected in the map and list below.[3]

Most of the inscriptions listed below are written in Arabic.[4] The list excludes the rich corpus of Sabaic and other Ancient South Arabian (ASA) inscriptions (such as Himaic), which were written in the Musnad script. It should be emphasized that a number of late ancient monotheistic Sabaic inscriptions have been found in Saudi Arabia. The 4th–6th century Sabaic inscriptions, numbering circa 200 items, are Jewish, Christian, and unclassified monotheistic in their content.[5] For instance, see Sabaic inscription Ry 506 (= Murayghān 1), commissioned by the king Abraha and Christian in content, which has been found in southern Saudi Arabia, in the area of Tathlith.[6]

The list of monotheistic inscriptions from Saudi Arabia

Jewish inscriptions, circa 400–600 CE, excluding the Ancient South Arabian (ASA) material

Though north Arabia has yielded a rather large number of Jewish inscriptions dated before 400 CE, inscriptions written by or mentioning Jews and belonging to the time period 400–600 CE are – for reasons that remain unclear – somewhat rare in this region (in the north; in the Sabaic material they are naturally well evidenced).

It does not seem valid to argue that the number of Jews in northern Arabia declined drastically during this period (400–600 CE), since their presence there, including Medina, Khaybar, and other settlements, is well attested in the Muslim

3 Ilkka Lindstedt, *Muḥammad and His Followers in Context: The Religious Map of Late Antique Arabia* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004687134.

4 Pre-Islamic Arabic is sometimes called "Paleo-Arabic" or "Old Arabic."

5 For them, see the ***Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions***, in particular the (sub-corpus titled) ***Corpus of Late Sabaic Inscriptions***; https://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=44&prjId=1&corId=7&colId=0. For studies, see Iwona Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar à l'époque monothéiste: L'histoire de l'Arabie du Sud ancienne de la fin du IVe siècle de l'ère chrétienne jusqu'à l'avénement de l'islam* (Paris: De Boccard, 2009); Christian Julien Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta in Late Antiquity," in *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, ed. Greg Fisher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 127–71.

6 Latitude: 19° 3' 12.672"; longitude: 43° 46' 49.188"; see https://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=79&prjId=1&corId=7&colId=0&navId=362490294&recId=2447.

sources: the Qur'an, the so-called Constitution of Medina, and *sīra* literature.

None of the inscriptions mentioned below contain explicit dates. Their dating is based on paleographical and contextual grounds, which are not certain.

Date (CE)	**Siglum / reference**	**Location**	**Comments**
Third–fifth century?	Hoyland 2011, no. 4[7]	Mada'in Salih	A Nabataean Aramaic inscription reading "May Jacob son of Samuel be remembered well."
Third–fifth century?	Hoyland 2011, no. 16[8]	Mada'in Salih	A Nabataean Aramaic inscription reading "Indeed, may Simon son of ʿAdī-*w* be remembered."
Third–fifth century?	Hoyland 2011, no. 17[9]	Al-Ula	Script / language: A Nabataean Aramaic inscription reading "May Laḥmu son of Yehūdā be remembered well."
Fourth–seventh century?	Gatier 2020, no. 7[10]	Mabrak al-Nāqa, north of Hegra	A Greek inscription; the Jewish identity of the writer based on the name, Isaac son of Benjamin.
Undated but possibly fifth century	UJadhDA 405[11]	Umm Jadhāyidh	A (late) Nabatean Aramaic inscription; the Jewish identity based on the name, Ḥunayy son of Nehemiah
Undated but probably fifth or sixth century	FaS 1[12]	Wādī al-Misadd	An Arabic inscription; the Jewish identity of the writer based on the name, Bishr son of Samawʾal

7 Robert G. Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz in the Qurʾān and in Their Inscriptions," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'an*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2011), 94–95. See also all the other inscriptions discussed by Hoyland in this article.

8 Hoyland, 99.

9 Hoyland, 100.

10 Pierre-Louis Gatier, "Les graffites grecs de Mabrak an-Naqah (Arabie Saoudite)," *C*ahiers du Centre *Gustave Glotz* 31 (2020): 117.

11 https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/145

12 https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/94; https://alsahra.org/2017/09/%D9%86%D9%82%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%A9/

Christian inscriptions, circa 400–600 CE, excluding the ASA material

The Christian identification of the following inscriptions is based on the fact that they contain crosses. This interpretation (a cross = Christian) can naturally be problematized, particularly in cases where the cross in question is not clear. While Jordan has yielded a number of Christian Arabic inscriptions, this list, as stated above, is limited to Saudi Arabia.

Date (CE)	**Siglum / reference**	**Location**	**Comments**
Fourth–seventh century?	Gatier 2020, at least 12 Greek Christian inscriptions[13]	Mabrak al-Nāqa, north of Hegra	Pierre-Louis Gatier "Douze des vingt graffites concernent certainement des chrétiens: ceux qui comportent des croix et ceux qui témoignent d'une onomastique chrétienne (nos 1-3, 10-11, 14-20). Des noms peuvent être dits chrétiens parce qu'ils étaient ceux d'Apôtres ou de saints très vénérés, ou encore parce qu'ils évoquent une notion chrétienne."[14]
Undated but probably fifth or sixth century CE	BShDA 2 and 3[15]	Barqā al-Shāʿ (?) in southern Saudi Arabia	Arabic inscriptions by the same individual; BShDA 2 contains a large cross.
Undated but probably fifth or sixth century CE	ShThDA 1[16]	Shaʿīb al-Thamīla in northern Saudi Arabia (not to be confused with the toponym with the same name south of Riyadh)	An Arabic inscription; a cross and personal name.
Undated but probably fifth and sixth century CE	HSDA;[17] 23 texts, though some by the same individuals; crosses are engraved next to many, but not all, texts.	Ḥimā, near Najran	A very important set of pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions from Ḥimā. They show that Christianity spread in the region of southern Arabia in the fifth century. The content of the inscriptions is mostly personal names.

13 Gatier, "Les graffites grecs de Mabrak an-Naqah (Arabie Saoudite)."

14 Gatier, 127.

15 https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/126; https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/129.

16 https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/122.

17 Christian Julien Robin, Ali B Ibrahim Al-Ghabban, and Fāyiz Al-Sa'īd, "Inscriptions Antiques de La Région de Najrān (Arabie Séoudite Méridionale): Nouveaux Jalons

470	HSDA 1[18]	Ḥimā	See above.
548/549	DaJ144DA 1[19]	Duma	An Arabic inscription: mention of God (al-Ilāh), a personal name, date, and small cross.
Undated but probably sixth century CE	FaS 5b[20]	Wādī Atāna, Ḥarrat al-Rahā, between Tabūk and Hegra	An Arabic inscription reading "This is Qays son of Aḥmad. He wrote to Banū al-Khazraj: You are [at] peace! Indeed! He [i.e., Qays] enjoins you to righteous conduct toward God, and [cultivating] close ties [with relatives] and [acquiring] power."[21]
Undated; sixth or seventh century CE?	Chatonnet et al. 2022[22]	Ḥimā	The inscription is in Syriac; it reads "Lord have mercy upon me; whoever passes through this road, let him pray for me."

Unclassified monotheistic inscriptions, circa 400–600 CE, excluding the ASA material

"Unclassified" means that the content of the inscription or its accompanying symbols do not allow for a more specific identification of the writer's religious affiliation. However, it is likely that some of the writers self-identified as Jewish or Christian, even though their inscriptions (graffiti) do not make this explicit. Others might have been so-called pagan monotheists.[23]

Pour l'histoire de l'écriture, de La Langue et Du Calendrier Arabes," *Comptes Rendus Des Séances de l'Academie Des Inscriptions* et Belles-Lettres 158, no. 3 (2014): 1033–1128.

18 Previous note and https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/521.

19 https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/520.

20 https://alsahra.org/2017/09/%D9%86%D9%82%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%A9/;
for an argument that the inscription appears to contain a cross, which has been damaged by a later hand, see Ilkka Lindstedt, "Ethical Waṣiyyas on the Eve of Islam," in *Crossing Ancient Sacred Landscapes: Contacts and Continuities in the Ancient Desert Cults and Beliefs of Northern Arabia and the Arid Sou*thern Levant, ed. Michael C. A. Macdonald and Juan Manuel Tebes (Oxford: Archaeopress, forthcoming).

21 For a slightly different reading, see https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/121.

22 Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, George Kiraz, and Alessia Prioletta, "A First Syriac Inscription from the Area of Ḥimā (Najrān Province, Southern Saudi Arabia)," *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Des Morgenländisches Gesells*chaft 112 (2022): 37–49.

23 For the phenomenon of so-called pagan monotheism, see Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

Date (CE)	Siglum / reference	Location	Comments
Undated but probably fourth–sixth century	DaJ000DA 2[24]	Duma	A late Nabataean / early pre-Islamic Arabic inscription reading "May God be mindful of Mlkw son of Ḥyh son of Ṭbkhh."
Undated but probably fifth or sixth century	FaS 6d[25]	Near Tabuk	The reading of the text is not certain, but it references Allāh (written ʾ-l-h, like in FaS 8).
Undated but probably fifth or sixth century	FaS 7[26]	Jabal ʿAyrayn, between Tabuk and Hegra	An Arabic inscription reading "From Khālid son of Thaʿlabah to Banū al-Khazraj: You are [at] peace! And when you (pl.) come to this place of mine, I enjoin you to [righteous conduct toward] God."
Undated but probably fifth or sixth century	FaS 8[27]	Near Tabuk	An Arabic inscription reading "…[five words of uncertain interpretation] I am Thābit son of … To Banū al-Khazraj: You are [at] peace! I enjoin you to righteous conduct toward God, feeding the guest, fighting the enemy, and carrying out [the punishment] for damage [befalling one] …" The interpretation of the text is somewhat uncertain.
Undated but probably fifth or sixth century	FaS 9[28]	Near Tabuk	An Arabic inscription; the text begins: *bism Allāh*; the reading of the rest of the inscription awaits a more detailed study.

1999); Nicolai Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler* (AOS, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5913/2019488259. Here, "pagan" simply refers to someone who is neither Jewish nor Christian; no pejorative meaning is intended. Furthermore, these so-called pagans subscribed to a variety of religious beliefs and worldviews, including monotheism.

24 https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/519.

25 https://alsahra.org/2017/09/%D9%86%D9%82%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%A9/.

26 https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/86.

27 https://alsahra.org/2017/09/%D9%86%D9%82%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%A9/.

28 See the previous note.

505/506	ArDA1[29]	Al-ʿArniyyāt	An Arabic inscription reading "May He listen! May God be mindful of Ṭrdw son of Slmn and whoever invokes His/his name [in the year] [----] 400."
548/549	DaJ000DA 3[30]	Jabal Ḥalma	An Arabic inscription reading "May God be mindful of (the) troop from Dūmah who perished year 443 having responded his [God's] command" Or: "May God be mindful of the troop from Dūmah. He called (them to conflict) year 443 and they responded to his command."
Undated but probably sixth century	NRAA 4[31]	Umm Burayra, NW Hijaz	An Arabic inscription written by ʿAbd Shams, son of al-Mughīra; inscription begins *bi-smika allāhumma*; contains the word *Rabb*
Undated but probably sixth century	FaS 4[32]	Near Tabuk	An Arabic inscription reading "ʿAdī-*w* son of PN [wishes] to Banū ʿAwṣ/ʿAwḍ: You are [at] peace! Indeed! He [i.e., ʿAdī] enjoins you to righteous conduct toward God, and [acquiring] power, spears, and horses, battling the enemy, reverence for the relatives, and generousness toward the guest."
Undated but probably sixth century	Wādī al-Naqīb 5[33]	Wādī al-Naqīb, between Tabuk and al-Ula	The inscription begins *bi-smika allāhumma*; written by one son of ʿAwf; contains the word Allāh; the reading of parts of the inscription uncertain, but the beginning of the text is identical to NRAA 4 (see above).

29 https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/518.

30 https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/130.

31 https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/157; Abdullah Saad Alhatlani and Ajab Mohammad Al-Otibi, "A Palaeo-Arabic Inscription from the Ḥismā Desert (Tabūk Region)," *Arabian Arch*aeology and Epigraphy 34, no. 1 (2023): 183–93, https://doi.org/10.1111/aae.12235.

32 https://alsahra.org/2017/09/%D9%86%D9%82%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%A9/;
https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/125; Lindstedt, "Ethical Waṣiyyas on the Eve of Islam."

33 https://alsahra.org/2024/07/%d8%b1%d8%ad%d9%84%d8%a9-

Undated but possibly sixth century	Z 2; Al-Jallad and Sidky 2022[34]	Rīʿ al-Zallālah, near Ta'if	An Arabic inscription reading *bārakkum* [sic, written *b-r-k-m*] *rabbunā anā qurra bar sadd*, "May our Lord bless you; I am Qurra son of Sadd. The person was probably traveling between Mecca and Ta'if, according to Al-Jallad and Sidky.
Undated but probably late sixth or early seventh century	Al-Jallad and Sidky 2024, no. 1[35]	Near Ta'if	An Arabic inscription reading *bi-smika rabbinā anā ḥanẓala bn ʿabd ʿamr-w ūṣī bi-birr allāh*, "In your name, our Lord! I am Ḥanẓala son of ʿAbd ʿAmr; I enjoin righteousness towards God."
Undated but probably late sixth or early seventh century	Al-Jallad and Sidky 2024, no. 2[36]	Near Ta'if	This is the same rock as the above inscription. The inscription is written by one ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā son of Sufyān, but, interestingly, it is monotheistic in content, mentioning Allāh. The text might be evidence of so-called henotheism, that is, subscribing to the belief of God (Allāh) as the Creator and High God, though also acknowledging other deities.

%d8%b4%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%a1-1445%d9%87%d9%80-5-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d9%81%d9%84-%d9%88%d8%a7%d8%af%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%86%d9%82%d9%8a%d8%a8/

34 Al-Jallad and Sidky, "A Paleo-Arabic Inscription on a Route North of Ṭāʾif."

35 Al-Jallad and Sidky, "A Paleo-Arabic Inscription of a Companion of Muhammad?"

36 See the previous footnote.