

SUPPLEMENT TO THE
PROCEEDINGS OF THE SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES
VOLUME 40

THE DEVELOPMENT OF
ARABIC AS A WRITTEN LANGUAGE

*Papers from the Special Session of the Seminar for Arabian Studies
held on 24 July, 2009*

edited by
M.C.A. Macdonald

SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES

ARCHAEOPRESS
OXFORD

2010

This Supplement is available either as a set with volume 40 of the *Proceedings* or separately from Archaeopress, Gordon House, 276 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 7ED, UK.

Tel/Fax +44-(0)1865-311914.

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This Supplement is produced in the Times Semitic font, which was designed by Paul Bibire for the Seminar for Arabian Studies.

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ISSN 0308-8421

ISBN 978-1-905739-34-9

The Steering Committee of the Seminar for Arabian Studies is most grateful to the
MBI Al Jaber Foundation
for its continued generosity in making a substantial grant
towards the running costs of the Seminar and the editorial expenses of producing the
Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies
and this Supplement.

The Steering Committee would also like to thank the following for generously
contributing to the costs of the Special Session on
The development of Arabic as a written language
at the 2009 Seminar, the papers from which are published here:

The Leigh Douglas Memorial Fund
The Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies
The Seven Pillars of Wisdom Trust

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Preface

New research on Arabia in the humanities is regularly presented at the Seminar for Arabian Studies, a three-day international conference held annually at the British Museum.¹ Naturally, the programme is always extremely varied, with papers covering a timescale from the Palaeolithic to the end of the Ottoman empire, and subjects ranging from languages, inscriptions, and archaeology, to ethnography, sociology, history, art history, architecture, literature, and much more.

This tradition of variety of content is one of the Seminar's strengths and the range has continuously expanded over the forty years of its existence. At the same time, the Seminar's Steering Committee has recently felt that the conference should also provide a forum for more detailed explorations of specific topics on which new evidence or important new research had recently appeared. It therefore decided to initiate occasional "Special Sessions" dealing in detail with a specific subject. In 2007, the first of these was on *The Palaeolithic of Arabia* and was judged to be a great success.²

A second Special Session, this time on *The development of Arabic as a written language*, was held at the 2009 Seminar on Friday, 24th July. It was organized by Robert Hoyland, Venetia Porter and myself and consisted of a very full morning in which we heard an introduction and nine papers; followed, in the afternoon, by more papers and a lively and enjoyable workshop in which points raised in the morning were discussed and inscriptions, manuscripts and other items relevant to the Session's theme were presented.³

On the previous evening, I had had the honour of giving the MBI Al Jaber Foundation public lecture at the British Museum. This annual lecture generously funded, by the Seminar's major benefactor, takes place each year on the first evening of the Seminar. I chose as my topic *Ancient Arabia and the written word* as an attempt to present the background to the following day's Special Session. An edited version of this lecture, into which I have incorporated the paper I gave in the Session, will be found in this volume.

In contrast to the Seminar itself, the speakers in this Special Session were all invited, and the general areas on which they would speak suggested to them in order to give the Session an internal coherence. We are most grateful to all the speakers for agreeing to this structure and for the extremely stimulating content of their papers. We would also like to thank Professor Janet Watson and Professor Hugh Kennedy for chairing the morning session and the Workshop so admirably.

The Special Session was funded by the Seminar, and by the MBI Al Jaber Foundation, the Leigh Douglas Memorial Fund, the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, and the Seven Pillars of Wisdom Trust. To all these bodies we express our deep gratitude and we hope that they will find an appropriate acknowledgement of their generosity in the content of this volume.

Because the papers invited for the Special Session dealt with different aspects of a single specific topic, the Steering Committee felt that it would be best to publish them together in a separate book. It has therefore created for this purpose an occasional series of Supplements to particular volumes of the *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, which will be available, either as a set with the relevant volume of *PSAS*, or separately. The present book is thus a Supplement to the *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* volume 40, 2010.

Robert Hoyland helped with the translation into English of Christian Robin's Introduction and Pierre Larcher's paper into English, and kindly assisted with the editing of ʿAlī Al-Ghabbān's paper, for all of which I am most grateful to him. I would also like to thank Helen Knox, Rajka Makjanić, David Milson, and Paul and Janet Starkey for their considerable help in the preparation of this Supplement. However, any editorial faults are, of course, my responsibility alone.

¹ See www.arabianseminar.org.uk

² See *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 38, 2008: 1–69.

³ See the list of the papers presented, at the end of this volume.

The style and transliteration systems in this Supplement match those of *PSAS*, with the exception that, in discussions of letter forms, single letter, rather than two-letter, transliterations are used, thus: *ḏ* (not *dh*), *ḡ* (not *gh*), *ḥ* (not *kh*), *ṣ* (not *sh*), *ṭ* (not *th*).

I have provided a general subject index and an epigraphic index listing the numerous inscriptions, manuscripts, papyri discussed. I hope that these will be helpful to the reader as guides to the various treatments of the numerous topics discussed in this volume. The Seminar's traditional very tight schedule, by which the papers are published exactly one year after they were given, meant that there was very little time between the final setting of the volume and the date when it had to go to the printers. Thus both indexes had to be made at great speed. I therefore apologise in advance for the inevitable errors that will have crept in and hope that they will not reduce the usefulness of the indexes too much.

New discoveries and increasingly sophisticated studies are providing more and more evidence for the interplay of writing and of oral transmission in late antique Arabia. This volume of papers is presented in the hope that it will further our understanding of this fascinating subject and stimulate new explorations and research.

M.C.A. Macdonald
Oxford, July 2009