

'The Koran did not originate in Mecca or Medina'



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The script fashion and the language used in Mecca and Medina were else than those of the oldest Koranic manuscripts: this is evident from South-Arabian rock inscriptions.

Linguist and Middle East expert Robert Kerr brings new insights into the origin of Islam. According to him, the alphabet used in the oldest manuscripts indicates that the Koran did not originate in Mecca and Medina, but rather from Jordan, Syria and Iraq.

R. Kerr presently is professor at the department Archaeology and Classical Studies at the University *Wilfrid Laurier* of Waterloo, Ontario (Canada), after working at the University of Leiden in Holland. He teaches Arabic, Aramaic and Hebrew Languages and Linguistics, lectures on the Bible, on the Talmud and on the book of Aramaic Proverbs of Ahikar, Ugaritic Literature, and Comparative Semitic or Religious Studies.

The emergence of Islam can only be understood by considering its historical context. The Canadian scholar Robert Kerr argues, that this cannot happen, if one limits oneself to the texts in classical Arabic, in which the Islamic tradition has been recorded. It is necessary to know also the languages and cultures, with which the Arabs communicated throughout the centuries. It is precisely this kind of expertise that put Kerr on track of this remarkable theory: the Koran cannot have originated in Mecca or in Medina, because in that case the oldest Koranic manuscripts would have been written using another alphabet.

Diversity of interests is the key to understanding this alternative research on Islam. Here are just a few of Kerr's multidisciplinary scientific interests: after a professional career in the Canadian army he studied Assyriology and Egyptology in the German town of Tübingen. In Leiden in the Netherlands he specialized in Comparative Linguistics and Semitic Languages, which includes Arabic, Hebrew, Ethiopian and Punic (the language of Carthago). In his doctoral thesis he demonstrates, how after the destruction of Carthago by the Romans, the Punic language continued to be spoken for many centuries. He did fieldwork in Tunisia and, illegally, in Libya. He also investigated South-Arabian rock inscriptions.

Besides English Kerr also speaks French, German, Dutch, Greek, Latin and Russian. He reads Semitic languages like Punic, Hebrew and Arabic. Presently he teaches in Waterloo, Ontario. He has worked at the University of Leiden. He is specialized in the pre-islamic Middle East. He is not therefore an expert of Islam, but perhaps it's precisely because of this that he manages to introduce new perspectives in the discussions about the historical origins of Islam. Kerr became fascinated by the work of 'revisionist' Islamic scholars, who are dissatisfied with the orthodox traditions and who try to retrace, using sources of contemporary research, the real early history of Islam.

The geographic spread of South-Arabian rock inscriptions inspired Kerr to formulate his provocative theory about the question: where the Koran emerged? Usually, this is said to have happened in Mecca and Medina. But Kerr demonstrates that the alphabet used in these places differs from the alphabet used in the oldest manuscripts of the Koran. This is evident from the South-Arabian rock inscriptions, which have been found to the north of Mecca and Medina. These date back to the 8th century B.C. until the beginnings of Islam, 1500 years later.

Kerr has other more arguments, linguistic, archaeological, theological and historical, pleading against Mecca and Medina. The oldest example of Arabic language resembling the language of the Koran is a biblical text found near Aleppo in Syria, 1400 kilometers from Mecca. Kerr's way of arguing is like what lawyers call a 'chain-proof'. Not every single element has to be a conclusive proof, but the combination of them indeed is convincing.



An ancient koranic manuscript kept in the House of Manuscripts in San'a' (Yemen), using an old Arabic alphabet. In those days, this alphabet was not in use in Mecca.



Example of the South-Arabian alphabet, as it was used in Mecca at that time. No koranic texts have been found in this writing-system. This stone is kept in the National Museum in San'a'.

Kerr's observations about the alphabet form the most original part of his chain-proof. First he invalidates the persistent misunderstanding, that the ancient Arabs did not have any scripture. In fact, Arabs had been expressing themselves already for some centuries in writing, only using another alphabet than the present one, and mostly not in their own language. Many Arabs in the region now called Syria spoke Arabic, but wrote Aramaic. Others wrote Arabic, but with another alphabet than today's Arabic. The biblical text of Aleppo, for example, is written in Greek letters. Other texts are in the South-Arabian language, and these are particularly interesting for Kerr.

In the seventh century Arabic was less widespread than today. At present this language is spoken and written from Morocco till Iraq and from Syria till Sudan. In those days Arabic occurred in many places with other languages, especially in the northern and central parts of what the Romans called 'Arabia': the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi-Arabia and its western and southern neighbours) and the Jordanian steppes, Syria and Iraq.

The northern regions of Arabia were called by the Romans 'Arabia Petraea', after Petra, the legendary city carved from red rock in south Jordan. Its inhabitants probably spoke languages from which today's spoken Arabic has evolved, mixed with the common cultural language, Aramaic. They wrote Aramaic in an Aramaic alphabet, of which there were several varieties. Politically, Petra belonged to the Roman sphere of influence. Its elite consisted of Roman legionaries and heterodox Christians, who held their own particular opinions about the nature of Jesus.

According to Kerr, here are to be found the antecedents of the Arabic language and alphabet as we know them today. The east of northern Arabia, which includes parts of Iraq, was associated with the Persian Empire.

South of Arabia Petraea was, in the north of present-day Saudi-Arabia, 'Arabia Deserta' or deserted Arabia. Kerr is circumspect when talking about the languages spoken there. 'These were Semitic dialects, each oasis having its own different variety, not Arabic, but related to the language that would later develop into classic Arabic.' They are known from thousands of rock inscriptions, some dating back to many centuries before Islam.

The people living in Arabia Deserta did not use the Aramaic alphabet, but the South-Arabian, which emerged in the region now called Yemen, the third and southernmost part of Arabia. The Romans gave it the name 'Arabia Felix', or Happy Arabia. The various Yemenite languages were Semitic, like Arabic, but bore more resemblances with classical Ethiopian. Despite this linguistic difference, it made more sense for the people of Arabia Deserta, where Medina and Mecca are situated, to use the alphabet used for the Yemenite languages.

The first reason for this was cultural influence of Yemen, which from 1000 B.C. had been a legendary civilisation. Furthermore, the South-Arabian alphabet contains letters for all Semitic basic sounds and can therefore perfectly represent Arabic. Contrastingly the Aramaic alphabet has too few letters to do this, as is the case for the oldest Arabic alphabet, which developed out of Aramaic and where one letter may represent seven different sounds. For this reason ancient manuscripts of the Koran frequently have different options of translation. Only more recent alphabets took away ambiguity from written Arabic.

Even in the middle of the seventh century when, according to tradition, the Koran was compiled, the South-Arabian alphabet was still used in Mecca and Medina. Hence Kerr's thesis: if the Koran originated in that region, it would have been written in a local old-Arabic dialect using the South-Arabian alphabet, and not in (proto-) classical Arabic, which was current the north of Syria. Still, the oldest koranic manuscripts were written using the primitive ambiguous Arabic alphabet. Conclusion: the Koran is not from Mecca or Medina.

Kerr is angered by the destruction of South-Arabian rock inscriptions, for example during a [recent reconstruction in Mecca](#). This cultural vandalism of the Saudis deprives science of potential evidence. According to Kerr it is as barbaric as the scandalous destruction of statues of Buddha in Afghanistan. Recently Timbuktu has been added to the list.

A good theory is falsifiable, and Kerr's theory meets that condition. Possibly archaeologists will find in the surroundings of Mecca texts, written in an Arabic that resembles the koranic Arabic and dating back from at least the seventh century, in an early kind of Arabic alphabet. This would throw doubt on Kerr's theory.

Actually, papyri and inscriptions of Arabic alphabet dating from the seventh century have been found in Saudi-Arabia [Note of the webmaster: the rock inscriptions which has been "discovered" since 2010 are [obvious Saudi forgeries](#)]. Kerr however is not impressed. "Because

non-official inscriptions are decisive. These documents are official, governmental. Papyri from the same century have also been discovered in Afghanistan. Nobody will claim that at that time Arabic was the common language there. I do not deny that there has been an Arabic empire. The question is, whether it immediately was an Islamic empire, or if Islam arose later. That Arabic empire developed a governmental language, in which those papyri have been written”.

Another possible falsification would be the discovery of koranic texts using the South-Arabic alphabet. In that case too Mecca and Medina could have been the places where the Koran originated. But as long as those texts have not been found, the origin of the Koran must be sought, Kerr argues, in a region where Arabs used to live, where Arabic was the spoken language, but where the Aramaic literary culture (to which also belonged the old Arabic alphabet) was dominant. This situation did exist in Arabia Petraea and did not in exist in Mecca or Medina; these places were bereft of an Aramaic literary culture.

With the cooperation of Tomas Milo, illustrations provided by Robert Kerr & Tomas Milo.



'The destruction of inscriptions I Mecca is even scandalous than that of statues de Buddha in Afghanistan' – Robert Kerr.

Webmaster's note : here you can find, in German, a recent study of the same author: 622, *Year of Hegira or Year of the Hagarenians? Etymological and Comparative Observations Relating to the Early Islamic Calendar*

http://wlu-ca.academia.edu/RobertKerr/Papers/1629066/Annus_Hegirae_vel_Annus_H_Agarorum_Etymologische_und_vergleichende_Anmerkungen_zum_Anfang_der_islamischen_Jahreszahlung

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