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A Newly Discovered Letter of the Early Arabic Alphabet: A Distinction between Final *Jīm* and Final *Hā'*/*Khā'* and Its Nabataean Origins*

MARIJN VAN PUTTEN
Leiden University

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

(m.van.putten@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

Abstract

This paper studies the letter shape of the final jīm, ḥā', and khā' in seven early Quranic manuscripts. Examination of the shape of these letters in these manuscripts reveals a graphemic distinction between the jīm, which lacks the typical curved tail, and the ḥā' and the khā', which do have this tail. This distinction is lost in later Quranic manuscripts. I argue that the distinction between jīm and ḥā'/khā' is a continuation from the Arabic script's origins in the Nabataean Aramaic script, which had distinct letter shapes for these signs. Contrary to what has been previously thought, the evidence adduced in this article shows that the merger happened in the Islamic period rather than in the pre-Islamic period.

Introduction

The Arabic script as we know it today can be thought of as an “archigraphemic” system, in which one letter shape may stand for a variety of different signs.¹ In a nonfinal position, for example, the single denticle may stand for *bā'*, *tā'*, *thā'*, *nūn*, or *yā'* depending on its dotting, though in a final position the *nūn* and the *yā'* are distinct. In early manuscripts, where the dots are very often not marked, these signs are fully homographic.

Traditionally, the *jīm*, the *ḥā'*, and the *khā'* have been considered to have a single archigraphemic representation as well. For example, in undotted script *zawj* ‘spouse’ and *rūḥ* ‘spirit’ are completely homographic:

روح زوج

* I thank May Shaddel, Fokelien Kootstra, and Benjamin Suchard for providing important feedback on an early draft of this article.

1. T. Milo, “Arabic Typography,” in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, ed. Lutz Edzard and Rudolf de Jong (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

