Notes and Brief Communications

Early Arabo-Islamic Epigraphy and the Positivist Fallacy: A Brief Communication

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The last two decades have witnessed a veritable explosion of new finds in the field of Arabian epigraphy. Fortunately, these new discoveries have not left the field of early Islamic history untouched. No less a shift in Arabo-Islamic epigraphy is its entrance into the digital age, as can be seen in the transformation of the *Thesaurus d'Épigraphie Islamique* into an online portal.[1] Amateur enthusiasts have also become a key engine in disseminating awareness of and enthusiasm for these inscriptions among a broader public, and even specialists, through blogs and digital platforms such as Twitter.[2] However, despite the swift progress of Arabian epigraphic studies in recent years, historians of the early Islamic period remain, as Jonathan Brockopp has recently observed, "at the earliest stages of properly describing the material."[3] Studies of this material by linguists, philologists, epigraphers, intellectual historians, and the like remain pressing desiderata.[4]

1. URL: http://www.epigraphie-islamique.org/.

2. The most prolific and skilled among these are Farīq al-Saḥrāʾ (URL: http://alsahra.org, last accessed 31 May 2018) and Mohammed Almoghathawi (URL: https://twitter.com/mohammed93athar, last accessed 31 May 2018). Although well-meaning, the concern that professionals and, more importantly, their methods be given priority still remains of the foremost concern. The documentation and publication of new epigraphic material must still be carried out by scientific teams who have acquired research permit and legal permissions to do so.

3. J. Brockopp, "Islamic Origins and Incidental Normativity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84 (2016): 28-43.

4. For Arabo-Islamic epigraphy, the recent work of Frédéric Imbert is of particular note. See F. Imbert, "L'Islam des pierres : l'expression de la foi dans les graffiti arabes des premiers siècles," *REMMM* 129 (2011), online, URL: http://remmm.revues.org/7067 (last consulted 31 May 2018); idem, "Le Coran des pierres: statistiques épigraphiques et première analyses," in *Le Coran, nouvelles approches*, ed. Mehdi Azaiez and Sabrina Mervin (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2013), 99-124; idem, "Graffiti arabes de Cnide et de Kos: premières trace épigraphiques de la conquête musulmane en mer Egée," *Travaux et Mémoires* 17 (2013): 731-58.

This brief reflection concerns one of the hermeneutical hazards that historians of the early Islamic period must face when interpreting this material: the 'positivist fallacy'. The term was coined by Anthony Snodgrass, a specialist in ancient Greek archaeology, in the 1980s in a series of publications. Snodgrass defined the positivist fallacy as the assumption that, "archaeological prominence and historical importance are much the same thing; that the observable phenomena are by definition the significant phenomena."[5] He later reframed it as "requiring the evidence of excavation to express itself in the language of historical narrative."[6] The fallacy, in Snodgrass's view, is best illustrated by close consideration of specific case studies, but the more vulgar version of the fallacy often appears in public misconceptions about archaeology, that it 'proves' or 'disproves' this or that ideological vision of history, and in journalistic treatments of archaeological surveys and excavations that rush to sensationalize archaeologists' findings by, for example, connecting said findings to famous historical, or even mythic, figures and events.

To illustrate the hazards of historical interpretation posed by the positivist fallacy as it relates to epigraphy and early Islamic history, I will consider the example of an Arabo-Islamic graffito discovered in the Ḥismā region near Tabūk and anticipate, merely for illustrative purpose, how the positivist fallacy might misconstrue it. The graffito has been recently edited, analyzed and dated in the groundbreaking 2017 dissertation of Maysāʾ al-Ghabbān (see figures 1-3), whose skillful analysis of the text does not succumb to this fallacy.[7] The graffito in question appears on a rock face above two other graffiti whose content need not concern us here (notwithstanding their importance in a proper epigraphic analysis of the find, as is found in Dr. al-Ghabbān's dissertation).

The paleography of the inscription, which is undated, indicates that is indubitably early, certainly no later than the second century AH (eighth century CE). Furthermore, the textual content of this graffito hits several striking points of intrinsic historical interest: 1) its use of an early *taṣliyah* formula asking for God to bless Muḥammad as His servant (*ʿabd*) and messenger (*rasūl*) in accord with a qurʾanic injuction (cf. Q. Aḥzāb 33:56); 2) a prayer asking God for a noble death in His path (*sharaf al-qatl fī sabīlih*), thus evoking a militant piety resonant with early qurʾanic discourse;[8] and 3) the mention of a famous

5. A. Snodgrass, "Archaeology," in *Sources for Ancient History*, ed. M. Crawford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 142 [137-184].

6. A. Snodgrass, *An Archaeology of Greece: The Present State and Future Scope of the Discipline* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 38.

7. M. al-Ghabbān, *al-Kitābāt al-islāmiyyah al-mubakkirah fī haḍbat Ḥismā bi-minṭaqat Tabūk: Dirāsah taḥlīliyyah āthāriyyah wa-lughawiyyah*, Ph.D. dissertation, King Saud University (2016-17), 103-4.

8. The reading *sharaf al-qatl* is to be preferred over *sharaf al-qit[ā]l* as *qatl* here stands in lieu of the words 'martyrdom' (Ar. *shahādah*, *istishhād*) and 'death' (Ar. *al-mawt*) broadly attested similarly themed inscriptions; moreover, the idiom *al-qatl fī sabīl Allāh* is widely attested in the *ḥadīth* literature—e.g., "To be slain in Path of God covers all sins (*al-qatl fī sabīl Allāh yukaffiru kull khaṭiʾah*)." See the careful argumentation of Ilkka Lindstedt, "Religious warfare and martyrdom in Arabic graffiti (70s-110s AH/690s-730s CE)," in *Scripts and*

Figure 1: Photo from Farīq al-Saḥrāʾ

Photo source: ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, Muḥammad Shafīq Khālid al-Bayṭār, Saʿd Sulaymān al-Saʿīd, and Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Dāmigh, *Nuqūsh Ḥismā: kitābāt min ṣadr al-islām shamāl gharb al-Mamlakah* (Riyadh: Manshūrāt al-Majalla al-ʿArabiyya, 2017), 127 (Figure 8).

historical figure of early Islamic history, Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān.

Muʿāwiyah, a contemporary of the Prophet Muḥammad, ruled over the early Islamic polity as Commander of the Faithful from 661-680 CE and is typically considered the founder of the Umayyad caliphal dynasty. Although this particular inscription bears his name, it does not call him by his regnal title, 'Commander of the Faithful (*amīr al-muʾminīn*),' as do all other pertinent discoveries.[9] Can one, therefore, conclude that this inscription dates to the time *before* his reign as *amīr al-muʾminīn*? If so, this graffito would be unprecedented on multiple accounts: it

Scripture: Writing and Religions in Arabic, 500-700 CE (Chicago: Oriental Institute, forthcoming), 23n72. I cite there the pre-published paper available online at: https://www.academia.edu/35307034/Religious_warfare_and_martyrdom_in_Arabic_graffiti_70s_110s_AH_690s_730s_CE_ (last accessed 31 May 2018). On militancy in early qurʾanic piety, see Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 82 ff.

9. Robert Hoyland, "New documentary texts and the early Islamic state," *BSOAS* 69 (2006): 399.

Figure 2: Arabic text based on Ghabbān, 103-4

1) اللهم صلى على محمد عبدك ورسولك واعظم أجره
2) واكرم نزله وكتب سعيد بن ذكو[ا]ن مولى معاوية
3) ابن أبي سفيان هو يسـ[ـئـ]ـل االله بأفضل ما سأله عبد من الأوّلين
4) والآخرين أن يرزقه شرف القتل في سبيله

Figure 3: English Translation

1) God, bless Muḥammad Your servant and Your messenger. Make great his reward*
2) And make noble his reception** and [thus] wrote Saʿīd ibn Dhakwān, the freedman (mawlā) of Muʿāwiyah
3) ibn Abī Sufyān and he asks God the most virtuous thing His servants ask of Him, of the earliest
4) and the latest generations***: to grant him to be slain nobly in His Path

* cf. Q. Ṭalāq 65:5, Muzzammil 73:20
** viz., in Paradise; cf. Q. Sajdah 32:19.
*** cf. Q. Wāqiʿah 56:49

would be the earliest material evidence for virtually every piece of historical datum that it conveys. In other words, it would be the earliest mention in Arabic of Muḥammad by name as well as by epithet; the earliest mention of Muʿāwiyah himself; and the earliest historical testimony to the qurʾanic themes it invokes.

However, such an interpretation of the evidence contained in the inscription would be wholly misguided, and it is to Maysāʾ al-Ghabbān's credit that she does not even deign to entertain such an interpretation. The assumptions behind such an interpretation would exemplify 'the positivist fallacy': it uses ambiguous evidence and, ignoring its inherent ambiguity, posits the most historically significant possible reading. This hypothetical reading achieves this aim, moreover, at the expense of the inscription's value per se as material evidence and instead favors extrinsic considerations of 'historical significance'. Paleographic analysis suffices to exclude this interpretation as an anachronism: one of the most conspicuous orthographic indications that the inscription does *not* date to the earliest stratum of Arabo-Islamic inscriptions can be seen in its transcription of the name Muʿāwiyah. The utilization of a plenary medial-*alif* and a 'closed', rather than 'open', medial-*ʿayn* places the inscription squarely outside the earliest stratum of Arabo-Islamic inscriptions – the orthography of the graffito provides sufficient intrinsic evidence to demonstrate that it could not possibly date to the period of Muʿāwiyah's reign, let alone before that period.

Further ambiguity lies in the wording of the inscription itself, specifically the

reference to 'Saʿīd son of Dhakwān.' Frédéric Imbert and Maysāʾ al-Ghabbān have pointed out, in reference to the phrase, "Saʿīd son of Dhakwān the *mawlā* of Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān," that it is not entirely clear which of the men named is the freedman/client (*mawlā*) of Muʿāwiyah. Is it Saʿīd or his father, Dhakwān, who is the *mawlā* of Muʿāwiyah? Both readings are plausible.[10] The literary sources name, after all, a *mawlā* of the Banū Umayyah named Dhakwān who was bound by clientage to ʿAmr ibn Saʿīd ibn al-ʿĀṣ.[11]

This observation relates to a further question raised by the positivist fallacy. It concerns the connection between *literary* and *material* evidence. The positivist fallacy can lead one to presume that, for example, a person mentioned in a *literary* source is necessarily the same person mentioned in a *documentary* source, even when there is insufficient warrant for making such an identification. Consider, then, the following mention of a certain "Saʿīd the *mawlā* of Muʿāwiyah" in an anecdotal report from the *Aḥkām al-Qurʾan*, a fourth/tenth-century source by the Egyptian Ḥanafī scholar, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Taḥāwī (d. 321/933):[12]

> Yūsuf ibn Yazīd related to us, saying: Ḥajjāj ibn Ibrāhīm related to us, saying: ʿĪsā ibn Yūnus related to us from ʿAbd al-Malik, from ʿAṭāʾ,[13] who said:
>
> Saʿīd, the *mawlā* of Muʿāwiyah, and some of his companions were fortified in a citadel in al-Ṭāʾif, but were captured and taken to ʿAbdallāh ibn al-Zubayr, who was in Mecca. [Ibn al-Zubayr] sent a message to Ibn ʿAbbās, asking, "What is your judgement concerning these men (*mā tarā fī hāʾulāʾi al-nafar*)?" He said, "In my judgment they should be set free, since they were granted safe-conduct when you brought them into the Ḥaram (*arā an takhalliya sabīlahum fa-innahum qad amanū idhā dakhkhaltahum al-ḥaram*)" Ibn al-Zubayr wrote back to him, "Should we simply remove them from the Ḥaram and crucify them?" Ibn ʿAbbās replied, "Why did you bring them into [the Haram] in the first place?" Ibn al-Zubayr took them outside the Ḥaram and crucified them.

Is the Saʿīd mentioned in the inscription from Ḥismā region the same Saʿīd mentioned here in the anecdote? If so, it would seem to date the inscription to before the outbreak of the Second Civil War and thus Ibn al-Zubayr's consolidation of power in the Ḥijāz and his capture of Mecca, Medina, and al-Ṭāʾif. To be more precise, the identification of the two Saʿīds

10. Ghabbān, 101, 408; F. Imbert, "Califes, princes et compagnons dans les graffiti du début de l'Islam," *Romano-Arabica* 15 (2015): 68.

11. Abū al-Qāsim Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad al- Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971), *al-Muʿjam al-kabīr*, 25 vols., ed. Ḥamdī ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Salafī (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymīya, 1983[2]), 6: 61-62.

12. Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 2 vols., ed. Sadettin Ünal (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1998), 2: 311 and idem, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, 16 vols., ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 1994), 9: 379.

13. The authority cited here is the Meccan scholar ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ (25 or 27–115 or 114/646 or 648–733 or 732); see *EI*[3], art. "ʿAṭāʾ b. Abī Rabāḥ" (H. Motzki).

requires that the graffito predates the sudden death of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd ibn Muʿāwiyah in 64/683.[14] If this dating of the graffito is correct, the inscription takes on remarkable value. It may not date prior to Muʿāwiyah's assumption of the title 'Commander of the Faithful' as in the hypothetical reading entertained above, but it would be extraordinarily early nevertheless. The graffito would offer us our earliest Arabic attestation of Muḥammad's name and epithet, 'the Messenger of God' (Ar. *rasūl allāh*), predating by perhaps several years what is currently the earliest known attestation: coins minted in Bīshāpūr on behalf the counter-caliph ʿAbdallāh ibn al-Zubayr by his brother-in-law and governor of the East, ʿAbd al-Malik ibn ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿĀmir, between 66/685 and 69/688-89.[15]

Based on the paleographic evidence itself—i.e., the interpretation of the material evidence *qua* material evidence—arguments for such an early date for the inscription remain nigh impossible to maintain. How, therefore, should one treat the literary evidence adduced above? Fortunately, the literary sources take a real interest in this seemingly obscure episode of the Umayyad *mawlā*'s capture in al-Ṭāʾif and his eventual execution in Mecca, for reasons having to do both with its legal ramifications for the shedding of blood within the sacred precincts of Mecca and for its role in polemics directed against the legitimacy of the Zubayrids. Thus, for example, the sources have Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib,[16] and those who revered him as his father's successor and as the sole legitimate Imam of the Muslims, reference Ibn al-Zubayr's cruel execution of the *mawlā* and his companions as sufficient reason to reject his claim to be the Commander of the Faithful and thus deny him their pledge of fealty (Ar. *bayʿah*). Not only did Ibn al-Zubayr lack the broad consensus of the community (Ar. *ijmāʿ*), they argued, but he had also unjustly shed blood in pursuit of the highest office of leadership over that community, thereby nullifying his candidacy.[17]

A broad survey of the earliest sources regarding the controversy reveals, in fact, that al-Taḥāwī's account is an outlier: in all likelihood, al-Ṭaḥāwī recorded the name of the slain *mawlā* erroneously. All other accounts give the name of the *mawlā* as *Saʿd* rather than *Saʿīd* (i.e., سعد , not سعيد)—names that are easily confused.[18] Indeed, the oldest source to mention Ibn al-Zubayr's crucifixion of the man—the *Muṣannaf* of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī

14. For a new discussion, see May Shaddel and Michael Bates, "ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Zubayr, Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya, and the Beginnings of the Second Civil War: A Reappraisal," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 45 (forthcoming 2018).

15. Hoyland, "New documentary texts," 396-97.

16. Known widely as Ibn al-Ḥanafiyyah, 'son of the woman from the Ḥanīfah tribe', since he was the son of ʿAlī's concubine, Khawlah, unlike his brothers al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, who were the sons of the Prophet Muḥammad's daughter Fāṭimah.

17. Wadād al-Qāḍī, *al-Kaysāniyyah fī al-tārīkh wa-al-adab* (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1974), 85-87.

18. Cf. Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892), *Ansāb al-ashrāf*, vol. 2, ed. Wilferd Madelung (Beirut: Klaus Schwarz, 2003), 656; Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, 26 vols., ed. ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo: Hajar, 2001), 5:603; Ibn al-Athīr (d. 620/1233), *al-Kāmil fī l-tārīkh*, 11 vols., ed. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām al-Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿArabī, 2012), 3: 318.

(d. 211/827)—even claims that it was not Muʿāwiyah but rather his brother, ʿUtbah ibn Abī Sufyān, who was the crucified client's Umayyad patron.[19] This "Saʿd, the *mawlā* of Muʿāwiyah," mentioned in the literary sources has, therefore, no connection at all with the inscription, and all that we know about him is his small part in the conflict between the Umayyads and the Zubayrids.

In light of the above considerations, Maysāʾ al-Ghabbān's dating of the graffito to the late-first/seventh or early-second/eighth century stands, notably on the basis of the paleographic evidence, the evidentiary merit of which stands on its own. My aim in the foregoing discussion has been to demonstrate the hazards of the 'positivist fallacy' and importance of taking the data intrinsic to the material evidence seriously before making appeals to 'historical significance' based on literary evidence. Integrating material and literary evidence into our accounts of the past requires care and a good dose of epistemological humility. "The danger posed by the 'positivist fallacy'," as recently noted by Jonathan M. Hall, "resides in the extremely fragmentary nature of our evidence."[20] To treat the remains of the past, literary and material alike, as anything other than fragmentary opens the door to gross historical error. What we know about the 'Saʿīd ibn Dhakwān' is only what his graffito tells us: that he was likely a descendant of freedman/client of Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān and that he espoused a religiosity in which honoring Muḥammad as God's Messenger and fighting in His path played a central role.

19. ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *al-Muṣannaf*, 10 vols., ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-Aʿẓamī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1970-72), 5: 151-53; see also al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashrāf*, vol. 4(1), ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1979), 319 (citing al-Haytham ibn ʿAdī, d. *ca.* 296/821) and Ibn Aʿtham al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, 9 vols., ed. ʿAlī Shīrī (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwāʾ, 1991), 5: 156.

20. Jonathan M. Hall, *Artifact and Artifice: Classical Archaeology and the Ancient Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 208.