

Literacy, Orality, and the Qur'an's Linguistic Environment

One of the most exciting and productive developments in the study of Islamic origins during the past few decades has been a prodigious expansion in our knowledge of the linguistic history of ancient Arabia.¹ Innumerable inscriptions in a range of dialects and scripts have emerged from the deserts of Arabia, as well as from some of the oasis settlements in the north of the peninsula. Many of these have been dated well into the first millennium BCE, affording us a long record of linguistic data for understanding the history of the Arabian Peninsula. There are also many more recent inscriptions, including some from the centuries just before the rise of Islam. Although there are some surviving monumental inscriptions, mostly from the oases in the north, the overwhelming majority of these inscriptions are graffiti, mere doodlings on rocks by random passersby. These graffiti are often poorly executed and in a rudimentary script, and unfortunately their content is generally of negligible value for the historian, limited as they are to personal names and simple statements of a largely personal nature. Nevertheless, these graffiti offer the historical linguist a new opportunity to study the history of scripts and language in the Arabian Peninsula, and in recent years these findings have been brought to bear on understanding the early history of the Qur'an.

Although some bold claims have occasionally been advanced regarding the history of the Qur'an on the basis of this evidence, in light of the significant limitations inherent to the nature of this data, many of the conclusions that have been drawn are not always as certain as they may at first seem. Nevertheless, the net effect of this development has been an extremely positive one, inasmuch as it allows us to better comprehend the linguistic environment in which the Qur'an emerged, as well as the status of writing and literacy in this historical context. As regards the latter, surely the most definitive and decisive conclusion to emerge from this new interest in the early history of the Arabic language concerns the

status of literacy. According to the most recent and authoritative scholarship on the subject, the cultures of both Mecca and Yathrib, as well as the surrounding settlements of the pre-Islamic Hijaz, were, despite the existence of various systems of writing, fundamentally nonliterate. This means that insofar as we seek to understand the Qur'an, or at least some part of it, as a product of Muhammad's Mecca and Medina, we must at the same time recognize its status as a fundamentally oral text that developed within a broader cultural context that also was fundamentally oral. Consequently, recognition of these conditions must constantly stand at the center of any efforts to understand the formation and transmission of the Qur'an in its earliest history.

ORALITY AND WRITING IN THE LATE ANCIENT HIJAZ

For the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an in its truest and purest form exists only as a spoken text: the very word *qur'ān* means "recitation, reading, lecture." Thus the Qur'an as divine proclamation was and still remains primarily oral even in the face of its written form.² Angelika Neuwirth highlights this quality nicely at the outset of her recent book on *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*: "the Qur'an is not only a text composed orally but one that was also transmitted orally throughout history and is today represented primarily in this way."³ Yet, as one reads further in this volume, Neuwirth's position regarding the Qur'an's orality becomes increasingly muddled and unworkable, as she tries persistently to have it both ways. On the one hand, the Qur'an is fundamentally oral in its true form, yet on the other hand, Neuwirth also maintains that the Qur'an was written down effectively in its current form even in the lifetime of Muhammad. On this particular point, one must note, she stands sharply at odds with the reports from the Islamic tradition indicating the Qur'an's oral transmission as well as the reigning consensus of modern scholarship on the Qur'an.

Neuwirth identifies the Qur'an "not—as one might conclude from its frequent self-designation *al-kitāb*, 'the writing'—a 'book' conceived by an author that unfolds according to a preconceived plan; rather, as is clear from its equally frequent self-designation *qur'ān*, 'lecture, reading,' it is a proclamation." And so "the Qur'an itself," as she explains, "confronts the problem of its non-written form and the lack of the paraphernalia of writing."⁴ Neuwirth therefore concludes that "the very preservation of the proclamation, in oral tradition, was a task that lay on many shoulders, and its codification after the death of the proclaimer required further transmitters."⁵ Thus far, we seem to be dealing with a set of traditions delivered and then transmitted orally, without being fully committed to writing for some time—precisely as the Islamic tradition reports. Nevertheless, when Neuwirth comes to consider the Qur'an's status as a written text, we meet with the surprising assertion that "the most probable theory seems to be that at the death

of the proclaimer, the revelations received by this time had been fixed in writing, in the form of copies that had been established with his approval by some of his companions, although these forms were not submitted by the Prophet himself to a final redaction in the form of a codex.”⁶ Thus, Neuwirth would have us believe, without much evidence at all, that by the time of Muhammad’s death, all the revelations that he proclaimed had been committed to their final written form by some of his followers, and that Muhammad had inspected their copies and had given his approval. All that remained was to organize the revelations into a codex, with perhaps some final tweaks added to the text along the way.

It is true that Neuwirth’s work has been greatly influential on much recent study of the Qur’an, and yet one must identify her opinion that the suras of the Qur’an were written down in their present form during Muhammad’s lifetime under his supervision for what it is: an outlier that is far from the mainstream. To the contrary, as Daniel Madigan observes, “There is general agreement in Muslim, as in non-Muslim, circles that the Qur’an in its present form had not been written at the time of Muhammad’s death.”⁷ Only John Burton has previously advocated this position, and although his work brings great scholarly rigor in its argument for this hypothesis, it has convinced almost no one that the written Qur’an goes back to Muhammad’s lifetime.⁸ Some scholars, as noted in the first chapter, have suggested that there may have been some limited efforts to write down some of Muhammad’s teachings during his lifetime. While this is not impossible, the suggestion remains purely hypothetical and supposes that only some limited portions of the text, and not all the Qur’anic suras, were committed to writing.⁹ Indeed, Nöldeke and Schwally both concluded that “it is doubtful that Muḥammad put down in writing all the revelations of the divine book from the start.” Nevertheless, Nöldeke (and Schwally) simultaneously maintained that “it is likely that already many years before the flight he dictated entire suras to a scribe, not merely single verses, as Muslims claim.” The only specific evidence adduced for this claim, however, on which both Nöldeke and Schwally knowingly diverge from the Islamic tradition, is a report from Muhammad’s early biographies concerning the conversion of ‘Umar, which even Schwally must admit is a bit shaky.¹⁰ Indeed, these biographical traditions are, as we have already noted, notoriously untrustworthy when it comes to relating events of the early seventh century, and this memory of ‘Umar’s conversion certainly has more to do with how the Muslims of the eighth and later centuries remembered ‘Umar than with any historical information concerning the actual state of the Qur’an during Muhammad’s lifetime.¹¹

Schwally, as we discussed in the first chapter, appears to be primarily responsible for introducing the idea that significant parts of the Qur’an were written down during Muhammad’s lifetime. And while many scholars seem to have subsequently embraced this assumption, any convincing evidence for it is wanting. For instance, in making his case Schwally argues that the Qur’an’s “different names for revelation, like *qur’ān*, *kitāb*, and *waḥy*, are allusions to its written

origin.”¹² Yet these terms, in fact, clearly indicate the opposite! For instance, as Neuwirth notes, the word *qur'ān* means “recitation, proclamation,” and it stands as one of the most important indicators of the Qur'an's fundamental status as an oral rather than a written text. Likewise, *wahy* means “revelation” and it refers not to anything written but rather to the “preverbal inspiration” believed to lie behind the words of Muhammad's revelations. And as for *kitāb*, it is true that this word means “book.” Nevertheless, *kitāb*/book in the Qur'an refers not to the written Qur'an itself but rather, as Neuwirth rightly explains, to the archetypal heavenly “book” of which its revelations are but an earthly manifestation.¹³ Thus, when Schwally maintains that “sūra 29:47 contains an allusion to writing down the revelations,” this is simply not true. Instead, this verse refers to the heavenly *kitāb* from which the words of the Qur'an were taken, and there is no indication at all of anything being written down.¹⁴

The only other evidence that Schwally can muster is that the later Islamic tradition reports the names of certain individuals alleged to be Muhammad's scribes, as we noted in chapter 1.¹⁵ Yet there is no reason that we must take these later memories at face value, given the well-known unreliability of the Islamic historical tradition for the period of origins in general and for the history of the Qur'an in particular. Instead, it is quite likely that these reports simply reflect one manner in which later Muslim scholars came to imagine the Qur'an's production and transmission within the early community, in a manner that reflected their own highly literate and scribal culture. None other than Nöldeke himself judges the witness of the early Islamic traditions about the Qur'an as itself affording “unambiguous” evidence “that the Qur'an had not yet been collected during the Prophet's lifetime.” Otherwise, the reports of its subsequent collection would make little sense: “if they had gathered the whole Qur'an, why did it require so much effort to bring it together later on?”¹⁶ Or, to quote from a more recent scholar, Gerald Hawting, “The [Islamic] tradition's own account of the early history of the Qur'an makes that point for us. It tells of the existence and destruction of variant texts, and it is acknowledged that the text of the Qur'an as we have it bears no relation to the order in which it was revealed to Muḥammad. It is implicit, therefore, that the Qur'an would look rather different if it had been compiled and put into order by the Prophet himself.”¹⁷

ORALITY AND LITERACY IN MUHAMMAD'S ARABIA

The question of the status of literacy in the Qur'an's traditional milieu, and more specifically the lack thereof, is of course directly relevant to understanding the Qur'an's early composition and transmission. It is therefore unfortunate that despite a number of important recent studies on precisely this topic, the matter of literacy in sixth- and seventh-century Arabia has been largely ignored and passed over in most studies of the Qur'an.¹⁸ The same is no less true of any number

of recent edited volumes on the Qur'an's historical context, which, despite their contributions from many prominent scholars, generally elide the thorny matter of literacy entirely.¹⁹ Time and again, one finds a problematic absence of recent studies that directly address the status and role of writing in Muhammad's Mecca and Medina, issues that obviously have enormous bearing for understanding the Qur'an's earliest history.²⁰ It is true that scholarship on the formation of the Qur'an has occasionally ventured outside the Hijaz, to South Arabia or the northern oases in the orbit of the Nabateans, in order to find evidence of pre-Islamic literacy in Arabic, as evidenced most notably in the work of Christian Robin and Robert Hoyland. Yet not only are these regions quite distant from Mecca and Medina, but they are also socially, culturally, economically, and environmentally very different, so that we may not blithely draw conclusions about the Qur'an's traditional homeland based on what we find in these locations. Accordingly, as Peter Stein rightly cautions, epigraphic evidence from these other regions "does not warrant the assumption of literacy in the sense that writing is used on a regular basis in order to perform a range of communicative tasks within commercial and social life."²¹

Given the near-total absence of the important and authoritative studies of literacy in pre-Islamic Arabia by Michael Macdonald, Peter Stein, and others from much recent scholarship on the Qur'an, I have little doubt that many readers will be surprised and perhaps even incredulous to learn of their striking conclusions. Indeed, to my knowledge, only Sidney Griffith has taken Macdonald's studies on this topic fully into consideration, leading him to conclude that the severe limitations of literacy at the dawn of Islam mean that any knowledge of biblical tradition in the Qur'an's audience must have been learned through oral tradition.²² Yet, despite their frequent absence from the conversation, the conditions of literacy in late ancient Arabia as Macdonald has identified them must inform how we understand the early history of the Qur'an.

As it turns out, literacy in the early seventh-century Hijaz was in fact extremely rare and almost completely unknown, to such a degree that we must conceive of the formation of Muhammad's new religious movement and its sacred text within a context that was nonliterate and fundamentally oral. Robin effectively removes all ambiguity on this matter in alerting us plainly to the reality that "writing was hardly practiced at all in the time of Muhammad."²³ There are numerous graffiti carved onto rocks in the desert from around this time, it is true, and so writing in Arabic was not entirely unknown in Muhammad's Hijaz. Indeed, as Stein observes, the sheer number of these scrawlings could easily give one a false impression that the Arabian Peninsula was "a stronghold of literacy."²⁴ Yet, to the contrary, there seems to be widespread agreement among experts on the early history of the Arabic language "that, before and immediately after the rise of Islam, Arab culture was in all important respects fundamentally oral," as Macdonald's studies in particular have now established.²⁵ Indeed, even Angelika Neuwirth has recently acknowledged "that the technique of writing did not play a

decisive part in the cultural life of pre-Islamic Arabia.”²⁶ Unfortunately, however, Neuwirth fails to see how this recognition fatally undermines her fervent conviction that the late ancient Hijaz was brimming with the sophisticated cultural and religious traditions of Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean that somehow had been transferred there.

Although Macdonald's determinations regarding literacy, which seem to reflect a reigning consensus on the matter, could not be more important or clearer, they have nonetheless been widely overlooked. Yet his words leave little room for doubt regarding literacy in the traditional milieu of the Qur'an's birth: as he writes elsewhere, we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that “—and this is a crucial point—despite the extensive use of writing with pen and ink implied by (a) the development of the Nabataean into the Arabic script; (b) the confident handwriting of the earliest Arabic papyri; and (c) the reports from the early Islamic period mentioning writing and documents, Arab culture at the dawn of Islam was fundamentally oral.”²⁷ Therefore, if we accept the findings of Macdonald, Stein, Robin, and Neuwirth regarding the nature of literacy in the Qur'an's historical context, then the Qur'an itself must also have been a fundamentally oral text that was not written down until much later, and possibly even in a different cultural context. Accordingly, we must conceive of the Qur'an's initial production and transmission as taking place in a setting that was effectively without writing and that was, most importantly, nonliterate more specifically with regard to the production and transmission of cultural and religious texts.

What, then, are we to make of the clear evidence of writing found in the numerous graffiti scattered throughout the Arabian desert? There is no question that multiple writing systems existed in Muhammad's lifetime that could be used for writing Arabic: why, then, did these remain effectively unused, and why did the cultures of the central Hijaz remain nonliterate, despite having writing systems readily available? A great deal of Macdonald's scholarship has been dedicated to explaining just how, despite the existence of a rudimentary writing system, ancient Arabian societies could in fact still be fundamentally nonliterate. According to Macdonald, a literate society is one “in which reading and writing have become essential to its functioning, either throughout the society (as in the modern West) or in certain vital aspects, such as the bureaucracy, economic and commercial activities, or religious life.” By comparison, a nonliterate society is one “in which literacy is not essential to any of its activities, and memory and oral communication perform the functions which reading and writing have within a literate society.”²⁸ With some exceptions, including most notably southwestern Arabia (i.e., Yemen), and certain larger settlements in the northwest near the Fertile Crescent, culture within the societies of late ancient Arabia remained almost completely nonliterate. Although some individuals had learned how to write in one of ancient Arabia's many alphabets,

the choice of writing materials available to nomads in antiquity was generally limited to the rocks of the desert. Literacy was therefore of little practical use in these societies and would not have displaced speech and memory as the means of communication and record. Instead, writing seems to have been used almost entirely as a pastime for those doing jobs which involved long hours of enforced, usually solitary, idleness in the desert, such as guarding the herds while they pastured, or keeping watch for game or enemies.²⁹

Macdonald reaches this conclusion not only on the basis of the available evidence for ancient—and late ancient—Arabia, but also through careful and illuminating anthropological comparisons with similar societies across the ages and even into the present. In many nonliterate cultures, both past and present, it is not uncommon for some individuals to acquire a form of rudimentary literacy in a basic system of writing that is generally learned from family in the home or from friends as children. In such cultures, writing is used mostly for games and entertainment, as well as graffiti and other sorts of brief messages, serving virtually no practical or official function whatsoever.³⁰ The presence of a primitive, casual system of writing in these cultures thus has no effect on “their continued use of memory and oral communication in their daily lives,” and these societies maintain “an extremely rich oral literature in which writing, even in their own script, plays no part.”³¹ For the inhabitants of the more remote areas of central Arabia, Macdonald notes, one must additionally consider the limitations that acquiring suitable media for writing will have played in restricting the transition to a literate society.

Writing materials have to be imported from the settled areas and are easily destroyed and, unlike paper in the modern age, papyrus outside Egypt is likely to have been expensive for people in a subsistence economy. Pottery, which when broken seems to have provided the everyday writing support for the sedentaries in much of the ancient Near East, was of little use to nomads for the very reason that it was breakable and not easily replaced, and they preferred vessels made of stone, wood, metal and leather. Thus, the only writing materials which were plentifully available to them were the rocks of the desert, but for most people these are not much use for writing lists, letters, or other everyday documents.³²

Why, then, did the nomads of the Arabian deserts bother to learn a simple form of writing that had no practical use? Macdonald suggests that, like the use of similar writings systems in other nonliterate societies, they learned it as a form of recreation. Their basic knowledge of a writing system likely came through contact with literate individuals, whom the nomads would have observed writing and then would have asked to teach them the basics, Macdonald suggests. Having learned a rudimentary form of writing, “the nomad would return to the desert and no doubt show off his skills to his family and friends, tracing the letters in the dust or cutting them with a sharp stone on a rock.” In this way, other members of the society would also learn the elements of the writing system. But

Because his nomadic society had no other materials to write on, the skill would have remained more of a curiosity than something of practical use, except for one thing. Nomadic life involves long periods of solitary idleness, guarding the herds while they pasture, keeping a lookout for game and enemies, etc. Anything that can help pass the time is welcome. Some people carved their tribal marks on the rocks; others carved drawings, often with great skill. Writing provided the perfect pastime and both men and women among the nomads seized it with great enthusiasm, covering the rocks of the Syro-Arabian deserts with scores of thousands of graffiti. The graffiti was the perfect medium for such circumstances.³³

The nature of what we find written in these graffiti is indeed perfectly compatible with this hypothesis: "The content of these graffiti, when it is more than purely personal names, is concerned exclusively with nomadic life and 98% of them have been found in the desert and almost nowhere else."³⁴ There is, in effect, a lot of "Kilroy was here" scattered across the Arabian deserts. So Neuwirth also observes, "Although recent archaeological expeditions have brought to light innumerable rock inscriptions dispersed widely over the Arabian Peninsula, there are hardly any written units that could be described as significant 'texts.' Most of the rock inscriptions, some of which are at least partly in a North Arabian language, employ the Nabatean script, and they are extremely short, dedicated mostly to private, ephemeral issues."³⁵

It is true that Macdonald states at one point in his work

that the picture that emerges from the settled populations of ancient west Arabia is one of literate societies in which, even if the majority of the population was illiterate, the written word was fundamental to the functioning of government, religion, and especially commerce. There must also have been a sizeable number of private citizens able to carve graffiti in the forms of the script used for public inscriptions. In South Arabia, we now have evidence of the extensive use, through scribes, of writing in day-to-day activities. In the north, we have as yet no direct evidence for the use of writing at this level, but there are strong indications that it must have existed there as well.³⁶

Nevertheless, it must be made fully clear, lest such a statement be misinterpreted out of context, that in this instance Macdonald's observations are made specifically in regard to southern Arabia (Yemen) and the larger oasis cities of the north, Taymā', Dedān, and Dūmah, based on evidence from the first millennium BCE. By contrast, when he comes to consider in this same study the very different circumstances that saw the rise of Islam in Mecca and Medina, he draws the unequivocal conclusion "that, before and immediately after the rise of Islam, Arab culture was in all important respects fundamentally oral, as is that of the Tuareg today."³⁷ One must assume that Macdonald has been very careful in drawing differing conclusions as they are relevant to different times and places, and one should accordingly read his analysis with similar care for discerning the specific contexts that he addresses. Indeed, one will note in this article, which considers the whole of

the Arabian Peninsula over the course of many centuries, that Macdonald has taken care to clearly punctuate the divisions between sections and topics: presumably readers are intended to take notice of these breaks in the article, which mark important shifts in geographic and temporal focus. Otherwise, his conclusions in this article would be entirely contradictory and make no sense at all.

Likewise, in stark contrast with the numerous monumental inscriptions that have been found in these northern oases and Yemen, there are no surviving inscriptions from either Mecca or Yathrib or their immediate surroundings.³⁸ Were there any monumental inscriptions in the central Hijaz, then presumably Robin and Macdonald would have come to different conclusions regarding the levels of literacy in Mecca and Medina. Yet the complete absence of any such monuments undergirds their shared finding that culture in Muhammad's Hijaz was both nonliterate and fundamentally oral. According to Macdonald, from the late first millennium BCE and the early first millennium CE, up until the rise of Islam, the Old Arabic language was "the vernacular of groups that were basically nonliterate, perhaps primarily nomadic." Hoyland too identifies Arabic in this period as the language of nonliterate peoples.³⁹ Thus, on the basis of these studies, we must confront the reality that by all measures Muhammad's new religious movement appears to have emerged within a fundamentally nonliterate society, where even in the presence of a basic system of writing, orality remained the privileged and authoritative medium. Recent affirmation of Macdonald's findings by Ahmad Al-Jallad importantly verifies their continued status as the reigning consensus regarding orality and literacy in pre-Islamic Arabia.⁴⁰ And so, as Jonathan Brown aptly summarizes the conditions in the late ancient Hijaz, we must understand that its inhabitants were "always on the verge of famine, drought, and death. . . . There is no government, no law, only family and the tribe. There are no written histories, only the recited poems of deeds done in battle and lost desert loves."⁴¹

A culture that "was in all important respects fundamentally oral" comports well what we can discern otherwise about the social and political conditions of Mecca and Yathrib at this time, affirming what we saw already in the previous chapter. The available evidence indicates that Muhammad's new religious movement formed within a tribal society, which was, like many tribal societies, stateless. Its political organization consisted of several competing tribes, each led by a chieftain, a role that Muhammad himself filled once he came to power in Yathrib/Medina.⁴² Governance in such a society did not require writing and literacy, and tribal societies very commonly have oral, nonliterate cultures: historically, even empires have functioned without the existence of literacy.⁴³ Moreover, religious culture in tribal societies generally exists in oral tradition, and, even if we were to assume that pre-Islamic Mecca was the site of a major pilgrimage shrine—which, as we have seen, by all indications it was not, pilgrimage, too, is a common feature of tribal religious practice.⁴⁴ The subsistence-level agricultural economies of Mecca and Yathrib likewise would have had little need for writing. Even any

hypothetical trade in leather goods with the Roman army would not have required any high level of literacy, and trade on such a scale is quite common in nonliterate, tribal societies.⁴⁵ The well-studied trade networks of the pre-Columbian native Americans in what would become the United States afford an excellent example of long-distance trade in goods between nonliterate, tribal societies.⁴⁶ One suspects that in the case of any Meccan-Roman trade, gold—and not necessarily Hijazi gold—would have been used as the primary means of exchange.⁴⁷

At the same time, however, one certainly should not exclude entirely the possibility that the rudimentary writing systems evident in the Arabian graffiti may have been used occasionally to write simple receipts or records of exchange. Yet this level of writing would not require any adjustments to the broader findings of Macdonald, Robin, and Stein concerning literacy. It is fully conceivable that in a nonliterate society such as Muhammad's Hijaz some very basic documents may have been drafted from time to time; the same may have been true of quotidian writings such as simple contracts, lists, or receipts. Such practices, one should emphasize, are generally assumed, however, rather than evidenced.⁴⁸ The one exception would appear to be a single passage from the Qur'an (2:282), which directs that all debts should be recorded by a scribe, a dictate that seems to presume that scribes were available somewhere, possibly in Mecca or Yathrib, unless the passage originated outside the Hijaz. Nevertheless, in this case, the members of the community are instructed to dictate their contract to a scribe, suggesting that Muhammad's followers were themselves illiterate. The same is further indicated by the following verse (2:283), which notes that if a scribe cannot be found, then there should be some sort of security deposit: writing an agreement on their own does not seem to be an option. Indeed, this passage from the Qur'an itself thus offers another sign pointing to the Qur'an's genesis in a fundamentally nonliterate context, even if there may have been some very limited use of writing in its immediate milieu.

Yet even if we allow the occasional production of brief documents of a practical nature, there remains, as Robin frequently reminds us, a "complete absence of literary texts, chronicles, treatises, poetic pieces, myths, or rituals."⁴⁹ That is to say, in terms of culture, these societies remained completely nonliterate and fundamentally oral, a point equally confirmed by Stein. Outside the northern oasis towns and South Arabia, Stein concludes, the extent of literacy present in the Arabian Peninsula was effectively limited to "the ability to leave behind spontaneous and brief rock graffiti, which serve the sole purpose of passing the time and fulfill no communicative function." And more importantly, as Stein further observes, "There are no indicators of the existence of a literature of an epic, mythological, or historical kind in pre-Islamic Arabia."⁵⁰ Therefore, even if we allow, as Stein in particular suggests, that the "presence of several people who knew how to write in a city like Mecca or Yathrib/Medina is plausible," this does not take us very far and still finds us squarely within a society that is fundamentally nonliterate.⁵¹

Perhaps there may have been some individuals who learned their letters as a pastime during the solitary days and weeks attending to livestock in remote areas outside of Mecca, as Macdonald's research would suggest. Yet, given Mecca's very small population and its remote location, one has to wonder if any of its inhabitants would actually have acquired even this rudimentary literacy. With just over a hundred adult males, was there really any need for writing or the opportunity to practice it? Indeed, if we think about such matters a little further, we should also note that according to the Islamic tradition, as well as many modern scholars, much of the Qur'an was first delivered in Mecca, where most of the village's inhabitants rejected the authority of both Muhammad and his revelations. This circumstance would leave us with perhaps around twenty to thirty adult males, at most, who were following Muhammad and listening to his teachings. Should we then assume that somehow one or more of these subsistence pastoralists was skilled at writing and was busy taking down notes of what Muhammad said? Need it be said that this seems inherently unlikely? One also must consider, along the same lines for that matter, just how few people would have even been around to hear any of the Qur'anic traditions that are alleged to have been spoken in Mecca in the first place. Any Meccan traditions, in such case, would have depended entirely on the memories of this same small handful of individuals. Likewise, in the case of Yathrib's small, quarrelsome, agricultural hamlets, do we really imagine that there was great need for individuals who could write complex texts, as would be necessary for any records of Muhammad's teaching there?

One should also perhaps briefly consider in this context the matter of Muhammad's personal illiteracy, as reported in the Islamic tradition. Although many scholars have long viewed this as an apologetic motif, designed to insulate Muhammad from knowledge of earlier Jewish and Christian traditions, given the social and cultural context in which he is alleged to have lived his life, his illiteracy actually seems highly plausible. Yet in any case, the reality is that if a Meccan merchant, or for that matter anyone else in the late ancient Hijaz, wished to become literate, he or she almost certainly would not have done so in Arabic, which was not in use for literary purposes or international exchange at this time. Instead, like the modern nonliterate communities identified by Macdonald, they surely would have learned to write in Greek or Aramaic, one of the prestige languages of the people with whom they traded, just as among the Via and the Tuareg, members who wish to acquire literacy do so in English or French, respectively.⁵² Likewise, any scribal work or receipts that they would have commissioned as a result of any long-distance trade would almost certainly have been in one of these two literate languages. Accordingly, if Muhammad were a merchant who traded over great distances and had acquired some level of genuine literacy as a merchant, both big "ifs," one imagines that he would have become literate in Aramaic and almost certainly not in Arabic. If this were so, then presumably his knowledge of Aramaic would have given him access to Jewish and Christian religious culture, which

provided then the basis for his new religious movement. While such a hypothesis is highly speculative (and I certainly would not endorse it), it certainly would explain a lot.

WRITING THE QUR'AN IN A NONLITERATE SOCIETY?

The state of literacy in Mecca and in the central Hijaz on the eve of Islam, therefore, is simply not compatible with the prominent practice of writing that Neuwirth's hypothesis regarding the Qur'an's full commitment to writing before Muhammad's death would require. This finding is significant, since the literary approach that she and her disciples advocate for studying the Qur'an as a text deliberately composed by Muhammad and his early followers in Mecca and Medina demands its rapid fixation in a written version that he himself helped to produce. Yet, if Macdonald and Robin are correct, and it seems they are, then the notion that Muhammad supervised the collection of his teachings into a written form before his death is extremely improbable. The social, economic, and material conditions in Mecca and Medina make for a rather high improbability that writing was practiced in either settlement at such a high level, if at all. Where, then, we must ask, could Muhammad have found scribes capable of transcribing his words in these subsistence-level villages where formal writing was practically nonexistent? Belief that the Qur'an was written down to any significant extent during Muhammad's lifetime simply defies plausibility in the current state of our evidence. It is hard to see how such a task could have been possible or would even have been contemplated in a fundamentally nonliterate context such as the Hijaz of this era. Reports of Muhammad's scribes in the later Islamic tradition must be, again, the innocent inventions of medieval Islamic intellectuals who were projecting the conditions of their own circumstances back onto memories of the life of their revered founder. Even Neuwirth on occasion acknowledges the fundamentally nonliterate nature of Hijazi culture in the early seventh century. And yet, she has chosen to believe, strangely and in the absence of any evidence, that toward the end of Muhammad's life his followers suddenly made the great leap forward to literacy and wrote down the entirety of the Qur'an under his direct supervision.⁵³

Nevertheless, if one follows the canonical narrative of the Qur'an's collection, as Neuwirth professes to do, both Abū Bakr and Zayd initially refused to undertake the task, protesting, "How can you do something that the messenger of God did not do!?" One has to admit, along with Nöldeke, that it is hard to imagine how such a tradition could ever have come about in the first place if the Qur'an had been effectively written down in its entirety or even in significant part under Muhammad's supervision during his lifetime. In this case, what could possibly have given rise to such a memory, which would be so patently false? The later Islamic tradition struggled to accommodate this remembrance, which was a source of considerable embarrassment for later interpreters.⁵⁴ Accordingly, in the

case of those whom the tradition recalls as having collected/memorized (*jama'ā*) the Qur'an during Muhammad's lifetime, we must assume that the latter meaning, "memorized," is intended—that is, if we place any stock in these traditions at all. If, as seems to be the case, Muhammad's teachings were not quickly written down, it would be extremely important for certain individuals to take on the task of trying to remember what he had told his followers. Such recourse to individual memory is the norm in a nonliterate, tribal society, although one should not make the mistake of supposing that these individuals were able to memorize his words entirely and verbatim, in the way that many Muslims will memorize the Qur'an today. As we will see in the following two chapters, human memory and oral tradition are simply not capable of such scope and accuracy absent the existence of a written tradition. Instead, we should presumably look on such figures as individuals who were held in esteem by the later tradition for what they could recall, to the best of their abilities, of Muhammad's teachings, rather than as human tape recorders.

Moreover, as the work of Gregor Schoeler has demonstrated, writing in early Islam long occupied a controversial position in relation to orality, which enjoyed privileged status. There was great reluctance to commit things to writing during the first century, a tendency that simply maintained the dominant cultural values of the nonliterate society within which Muhammad began his new religious movement.⁵⁵ In such societies, although a writing system may exist, "their scripts have not penetrated the basic functions of their own communities," and oral tradition retains its place of primacy for the production and transmission of culture.⁵⁶ Therefore, even after Muhammad's death, it remained the case that "writing in the early Islamic centuries was used for practical purposes, for letters or memoranda, for treaties, legal documents, etc., but religious materials (with the eventual exception of the Qur'ān), poetry and literary prose, genealogy, and historical traditions were transmitted orally." As Macdonald further remarks, "It is very doubtful that such a situation came about suddenly in the first Islamic century and therefore, although we have no direct evidence from the Jahiliyyah, it seems safe to assume that this was a situation which early Islamic society in Arabia inherited."⁵⁷ Unfortunately, Schoeler does not give much attention to the history of the Qur'an in relation to the fundamental orality of both formative Islam and the pre-Islamic Hijaz, since he instead faithfully reproduces the Nöldekean-Schwallian credo.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, at the same time, Schoeler makes very clear that by all indications the Qur'an was not and could not have been edited in Muhammad's lifetime but circulated orally after his death until its eventual collection.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the fact that early Arabic poetry—whatever its age and origins may be—also existed only in oral tradition for centuries offers yet another sign that we are dealing with a culture at the rise of Islam that was fundamentally oral in nature.⁶⁰

By all indications, the eventual move toward a literate culture and writing in Arabic comes later with the expansion of Muhammad's religious polity and the need for more sophisticated tools of governance in what was increasingly

becoming a vast multicultural and wealthy empire rather than a tribal state.⁶¹ Moreover, most of the inhabitants of this hastily acquired and sprawling polity belonged to cultures that had known a high level of cultural literacy for centuries and would therefore expect a literate administration that would govern using the written word. During the first forty years following Muhammad's death, we accordingly find just a few inscriptions and papyri written in Arabic, as well as some Arabic inscriptions on a number of Arab-Sasanian coins. These documents bear evidence of a limited move toward using Arabic as an administrative language in a manner that is not seen prior to the 640s CE.⁶² Nevertheless, much of the early caliphate's administrative activities continued to be conducted in Greek and other non-Arabic languages of the late ancient Near East. This was so not only because the vast majority of the region's inhabitants would have used these languages and not known Arabic, but also because many of the caliphate's early administrators were drawn from the among the same local notables who had been in power under Roman and Sasanian rule.⁶³ Only during the reign of 'Abd al-Malik do texts written in Arabic begin to appear in significant quantities for the first time.⁶⁴ Surely it is not a mere coincidence, I suggest, that the rise in use of Arabic as a written language would also coincide with the standardization of a written Qur'an into its now canonical version?

There is but one exception that I can think of to the otherwise consistent pattern of evidence indicating that Muhammad's new religious movement emerged within a nonliterate context, and it is admittedly a significant one: the so-called "Constitution of Medina," or the "*Umma* Document" as Fred Donner prefers to name it.⁶⁵ Scholars of Islamic origins are nearly unanimous in recognizing this text as a document from the time of Muhammad's rule as a chieftain of Medina's various tribes. This agreement between Muhammad and the Jews of Medina (as well as Medina's other inhabitants) allowed certain Jewish tribes to be incorporated within Muhammad's new religious polity, even as they were allowed to retain their Jewish identity and follow the Jewish law and scripture. The boundaries of Muhammad's new religious community as defined by this document, establishing the inclusion of Jews who remained Jews, are radically different from the attitudes that the later tradition would take toward Jews and Judaism. For this reason especially, scholars are widely agreed that this compact must bear witness to an authentic document from Muhammad's time in Medina. Its fabrication in some other context is by comparison highly improbable. Multiple versions of this document have come down to us via the Islamic historical tradition, no single one of which is likely to have preserved the exact wording of the agreement, let alone the features of the dialect in which it was originally written.⁶⁶ Yet it seems clear that these varying recensions must ultimately derive from some sort of written agreement that Muhammad had drawn up between the Jewish and non-Jewish tribes of Yathrib, outlining the terms of their union as one community under his leadership.

How should we square the production of this document with the fact that by all indications, Muhammad and his followers appear to have lived in a nonliterate society? I have to admit, the answer is not entirely certain, and Macdonald, Stein, and others do not provide us with any suggestions. Nevertheless, this document is at the same time not at all impossible to reconcile with such conditions. The most likely explanation is that, even though Hijazi culture was in fact fundamentally nonliterate, there were, as we have seen, basic systems of writing available that could be used when some sort of document was required, even if such occasions were relatively rare. It would appear that this agreement afforded just such an occasion, when the various parties involved demanded that some sort of terms be committed to writing before they would consent to come together under Muhammad's authority. Given the quarrelsome history of the Medinans prior to Muhammad's arrival, it would not be at all surprising if the inhabitants of Yathrib's hamlets demanded a clearly written account of the terms of their alliance before they would agree to come together. And, as noted above, it is entirely possible that, as Stein suggests, there were several individuals in Medina and even Mecca who could produce simple contracts or receipts in writing if needed. Presumably, then, there must have been someone at hand who could write down the terms of their accord using one of the many alphabets that were available on the Arabian Peninsula at the time, a skill perhaps acquired initially from the practice of desert graffiti. Accordingly, the production of this document to form the basis for Muhammad's new community of the Believers in Yathrib serves, I would suggest, as the exception that helps solidify the rule.

Based on what we have seen so far regarding the status of literacy and writing among the Arabs of the early seventh century, we must conclude that Muhammad's teachings were delivered to his followers orally and remained an oral tradition throughout his lifetime and even well beyond his death. The cultural conditions in which he lived and taught his religious vision were simply incompatible with any notion that we—and obviously many later Islamic intellectuals as well—might have of scribes writing down his teachings under his supervision. Even if there were a few individuals in Mecca and Medina who were capable of writing basic documents—simple contracts, receipts, lists, and so on—there is a clear and broad consensus that in Muhammad's Arabia writing was not used to record cultural and religious texts, which remained exclusively oral. Such is typical, one might add, as Jan Assmann notes, of societies that are only just beginning to use writing: in such cultures, "writing is rarely used to store cultural texts."⁶⁷ In our case, this limitation would include, rather obviously and inescapably, the religious traditions that would eventually inspire the Qur'an. Therefore, Muhammad's teachings must have been transmitted orally and without recourse to writing among his followers in the decades following his death, as they began to spread out swiftly across western Asia and North Africa.

At some point, and we don't know exactly when, Muhammad's followers began to record some fragments of his teachings insofar as they were able to remember them, piecemeal, as the Islamic tradition would suggest, on palm branches, stones, camel bones, even as many of his teachings continued to remain "in the hearts of men." Perhaps this process had begun already as early as the reign of Abū Bakr, or possibly not until Uthman came to power. Yet one would imagine that there was no great urgency to commit the Qur'an to writing during the first few decades of this new religious movement's existence for two reasons. Firstly, the fundamentally oral nature of culture familiar to Muhammad's earliest followers would have strongly discouraged such a move. Secondly, as I have noted in a number of other publications, Muhammad and his followers were expecting the apocalyptic end of the world to occur very soon, seemingly even before Muhammad's own death.⁶⁸ With such firm conviction, there would have been little need to bother with writing the Qur'an down in order to ensure its accurate transmission for posterity: there would be no posterity, since the world was soon to end. For comparison, scholars of early Christianity likewise understand that Jesus's early followers did not begin to write his teachings down until a few decades after his death for similar reasons. They, too, were expecting the imminent end of the world. Only as the end was persistently delayed longer and longer did they come to the conclusion that they would need to write things down so they could be remembered faithfully in the years—and centuries—to come. So it must have been also for Muhammad's early followers, who likewise only began the process of writing down Muhammad's teachings as time continued to pass and the end did not, in fact, arrive with the immediacy that was originally anticipated.

After these early rudimentary efforts to collect bits and pieces of the Qur'an on a variety of smaller media, Muhammad's followers eventually began to produce larger written collections of his teachings as they were circulating in the oral traditions and collective memory of the early community of the Believers. It was at this stage, most likely, that the first regional efforts to collect the Qur'an were undertaken independently of one another, as we explained in the first chapter. There was possibly even an "Uthmanic" version of the Qur'an that was produced at this stage, but if such a codex existed it would again have amounted to little more than the regional version of the Qur'an collected in the Hijaz, as proposed in the second chapter. One would obviously need to assume that in the process of transmitting memories of Muhammad orally over decades and collecting them into different regional collections, various changes and additions could and likely would have been made to Muhammad's teachings. Such alterations would have occurred, one must again note, without deliberate or malicious intent but instead as an altogether natural consequence of oral transmission and the nature of human memory, both individual and collective, as we will see in the following chapters.

Moreover, there is no reason to suppose that once these regional versions of the Qur'an began to be collected, their contents could not be modified or added

to. Even in Muhammad's lifetime we are informed that the contents of the Qur'an were regularly being changed, as old teachings were canceled and replaced by new, often strikingly different traditions through the process of abrogation. This same process likely continued as contradictory traditions continued to be newly remembered or discovered, even after the move to begin writing things down. Indeed, the Islamic traditions of the Qur'an's compilation and composition themselves alert us to the fact that there was great variation among these regional versions, so much so that their differences were perceived as an existential threat to the community of the Believers. It finally fell to 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj to forge scriptural unity out of this diversity, right at the moment when writing and literacy in Arabic were beginning to emerge as common, widespread practices. The result of their efforts was, to reiterate, a standard imperial version of the Qur'an that, with the backing of political force, would eventually supplant the other early versions and become the invariable received text that has come down to us today.

THE QUR'AN AND THE DIALECTS OF LATE ANCIENT ARABIA

Much work has been done of late in identifying the various linguistic dialects and writing systems in use in ancient Arabia as evidenced by the many graffiti and inscriptions that survive across the expanse of the Arabian Peninsula. Even more recently, scholars have sought to apply these findings in order to understand the early history of the Qur'an. Unfortunately, however, this promising new approach has yielded relatively limited concrete results so far, and there are in fact some significant methodological problems with the approach itself, at least as it has been employed until now. The promise of this method lies in the fact that the Qur'an was written largely in a very distinctive and almost singular dialect of Arabic. If one could, therefore, locate this particular dialect somewhere on the linguistic map of early Arabic, it would be possible to get a good idea of where the Arabic and the text of the Qur'an were produced. The only problem is that the scarcity of the unusual dialect in which the Qur'an survives leaves us with limited options for locating a home for the Qur'an.

Ahmad Al-Jallad has been the single most active scholar in this area; building on earlier work by Macdonald, he has considerably refined our knowledge of pre-Islamic languages, dialects, and writing systems. Even more important for our purposes are his ambitious efforts in some recent studies to bring this information to bear on understanding the earliest history of the Qur'an. In a recent article, for instance, Al-Jallad identifies some brief parallels between some very short phrases from the pre-Islamic inscriptions and similar elements in the Qur'an.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, however, these expressions are so brief and banal that there is little—if any—significance to them: for the most part they are generic idioms and vocabulary common to the traditions of Near Eastern monotheism, which clearly held

some presence in areas of the peninsula. The names of the northern Arabian deities mentioned in the Qur'an (53:19–22), *allāt*, *al-‘uzzā*, and *manāt*, also appear in inscriptions from the northern cities and Nabatean territory. Moreover, a number of the identified parallels come from South Arabia, which, one must again note, is culturally, socially, and linguistically quite distinct from the rest of the peninsula, thus further complicating the relevance of what amounts, in the end, to rather trivial similarities.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the most relevant development to emerge from Al-Jallad's work is his very recent and also very hypothetical identification of an "Old Hijazi" dialect of early Arabic, which is characterized especially by the use of a particular form of the relative pronoun. This dialect, he proposes, is represented primarily in the Qur'anic text, which could potentially aide us in locating the Qur'an's historical context. Al-Jallad has only briefly introduced the idea of an Old Hijazi dialect so far, beginning with a footnote in his important 2015 monograph on the grammar of the Safaitic inscriptions from the deserts of southern Syria, eastern Jordan, and northwest Saudi Arabia.⁷¹ The notion of such a dialect also receives fleeting mention in a pair of subsequent articles, where Al-Jallad repeats mention of an inscription containing this distinctive, isoglossic form of the relative pronoun.⁷² Nevertheless, the fullest—although still rather limited—discussions of this proposed dialect appear in his unpublished "Historical Grammar of Arabic" and his recent monograph on a bilingual Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment from Damascus.

In his "Historical Grammar," Al-Jallad proposes that the Old Hijazi dialect formed part of a larger continuum within Old Arabic, reaching back at least as far as the mid-first millennium BCE.⁷³ Such an early date is extremely questionable, however, as the actual evidence for this so-called Old Hijazi dialect is very limited and much more recent. The only potential witness to an Old Hijazi dialect before the seventh century CE comes from a single, ten-word funerary inscription from Dedān (modern al-‘Ulā), one of the northern oasis towns that also is mentioned several times in the Hebrew Bible.⁷⁴ The inscription employs the particular form of the relative pronoun distinctive to this dialect and dates with some uncertainty to possibly sometime before the first century CE.⁷⁵ This solitary epitaph, from the far north of the Hijaz, close to the Roman frontier, affords extremely meager evidence for dating this proposed dialect so early. Indeed, other than this lone inscription, the earliest witness to this dialect would be the Qur'anic text, on the basis of which Al-Jallad constructs the defining features of this particular form of Arabic. The only other witnesses to this hypothetical dialect are found in papyri from the first Islamic century and the bilingual Psalm fragment studied in Al-Jallad's recent monograph, in which study he proposes to "fully articulate the hypothesis of Old Hīgāzī,"⁷⁶

As it turns out, however, the linguistic evidence does not in fact support the location of the Qur'an or its dialect in the central Hijaz. The main problem is that Al-Jallad simply assumes from the very start that the Qur'anic text was

produced in the Hijaz, and therefore that its peculiar dialect may be identified with the dialect of Arabic used in the Hijaz. Accordingly, for historical purposes, this linguistic study of the Qur'an's dialect leads only to viciously circular reasoning, along the following lines. The Qur'an, we know, is from the Hijaz; so we also know its peculiar form of Arabic is the Hijazi dialect. And since the Qur'an is in Hijazi, its origins must be in the Hijaz. Yet, if one does not accept *prima facie*, as Al-Jallad does and we certainly do not, that the Qur'anic text as we have it was composed in the Hijaz, the linguistic data suddenly looks altogether different and invites very different conclusions. If anything, the linguistic evidence would seem to favor the location of the Qur'an's dialect in the lands of the early Islamic conquests, in the Levant or possibly in the Arabian lands along the Roman frontier.

As already noted, Al-Jallad identifies a particular form of the relative pronoun as the primary hallmark of this dialect. The lexeme in question is "based on the portmanteau demonstrative (*h*)*alla*+*DEM*," which yields the forms *'allatī* and *'alladī*.⁷⁷ This form of the relative does indeed appear frequently in the Qur'an, yet in all the pre-Islamic inscriptions it occurs only one time in a single inscription of uncertain date from northern Arabia, in a location that is part of the biblical world. Otherwise, the form is found exclusively in the bilingual Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment from Damascus and in Levantine papyri from the first Islamic century. In addition, another feature distinctive to the Qur'anic dialect "is the replacement of the infinitive as a verbal complement with a subordinated clause introduced by *'an*," as in the classical Arabic construction *'an yaf'ala*—"that he do."⁷⁸ This construction also is witnessed in just a single inscription from northern Arabia, again from the biblical town of Dedān, whose date has not been determined to my knowledge, as well as in the Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment and the early Levantine papyri.⁷⁹ In his latest monograph on the Psalm fragment, Al-Jallad adds the form of the "distal particle" as a third characteristic marker of Old Hijazi. This distinctive form inserts an "l-element between the demonstrative base and the distal particle, producing from the original proximal set *dālīka* and *tilka*," a form that Al-Jallad proposes is closely related to the form of the distal in Aramaic.⁸⁰ These forms of the demonstrative occur only in the Qur'an and the early Islamic papyri of the Levant: Al-Jallad gives no indication of their attestation either in inscriptions or in the Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment. Al-Jallad also seeks support from the later Arabic grammarians on these points, but, of course, their idea of just what the Hijazi dialect was determined, just like Al-Jallad's, on the basis of what they found in the Qur'an. As Pierre Larcher observes in his recently published monograph, in the later Islamic tradition, "The language (of the people) of the Hijaz' . . . appears to be nothing more than the Islamic name for Qur'anic Arabic, resulting from a detached examination of the rasm and not a study of the region."⁸¹

So, let us take stock of the particular Arab dialect that Al-Jallad purports to have identified and which he names "Old Hīgāzī." It has three distinguishing features: (1) a distinctive form of the relative pronoun; (2) a distinctive form of the

distal demonstrative; and (3) the use of the verbal construction *'an yaf'ala* in circumstances where other dialects would use an infinite form. The corpus of Old Hijazi, as defined by these markers consist of the following: (1) the consonantal text of the Qur'an; (2) Levantine papyri from the first Islamic century; (3) the Damascus Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment (also Levantine); and (4) two inscriptions of uncertain age (perhaps much older than the Qur'an) from the biblical city of Dedān, each of which attests to only one of the three elements used in identifying this dialect. The defining characteristics of this dialect are indeed quite few in number, but perhaps for a linguist they are sufficient to identify a particular idiom of the language. Yet the dataset identified as representative of this alleged Hijazi dialect is also very small; it is even, one could say, extremely narrow, consisting primarily of the Qur'an, with a few bits and pieces alongside of it. Much more significantly, however, this corpus of writings does not locate this dialect in the Hijaz, let alone in the central Hijaz, as Al-Jallad casually presumes.⁸² Indeed, such a conclusion can only result from the circular logic identified above: for the historian it amounts, as it were, to putting the cart before the horse. Any value that linguistic data might have for shedding light on the origins of the Qur'an is possible only if we do not assume that we already know the circumstances of the Qur'an's origins in advance. Instead, we must leave this factor as the unknown in our reckoning, allowing the linguistic data to lead us where it will.

Where, then, do we find the Hijazi dialect—or, as one should more properly call it, “the Qur'anic dialect”—beyond the Qur'an? Not in the central Hijaz, it turns out. Instead, the witnesses to this dialect are overwhelmingly found in the Levant, soon after this region came under the dominion of Muhammad's followers. The only exceptions to this are the two inscriptions from northern Arabia, which are, admittedly, on the northern edge of the Hijaz but which also stand within the world of the Hebrew Bible. And two stray inscriptions alone, of uncertain date, can hardly bear the weight of positing the use of the Qur'anic dialect in Dedān almost two thousand years earlier. This is particularly the case when both inscriptions are not only extremely short and perfunctory, but one is badly damaged and fragmentary.⁸³ Moreover, each inscription attests to only one of the three linguistic elements characteristic of this Qur'anic dialect. Should we not allow that the linguistic variants in these two inscriptions are just that, the unexpected appearance of exceptional forms rather than unambiguous and decisive evidence for the use of a particular yet otherwise unattested dialect in the region? The former would seem to be the more cautious conclusion in the absence of further evidence.

It is a long reach, I think, from the appearance of an isolated form in a terse inscription to the identification of a full-fledged dialect current in a particular time and place. And I am certainly no expert in Arabic linguistics, but the fact that nearly two thousand inscriptions in the Dadanitic script have been published so far, and yet only two evidence these stray features, hardly justifies identifying this as the distinctive dialect that was in use in the Hijaz. More verification for

actual use of the Qur'anic dialect in Dedān seems warranted, and it may possibly emerge one day. Or perhaps someone will better explain the significance of these two unremarkable inscriptions from a sea of thousands, as well as their singular variants for establishing usage in the area of Dedān (or for that matter the entire Hijaz). But even if we were to locate the Qur'anic dialect in this part of the Hijaz, one must note that this is essentially the same region that Patricia Crone and Michael Cook identified as the likely location of Islam's origins.⁸⁴ It is a region, for that matter, that could make better sense of the Qur'an's persistent conversations with the religious cultures of the late ancient Near East, including Christianity in particular. Dedān and the northern Hijaz would be a much better fit than Mecca and the central Hijaz, for instance; and if more evidence were to confirm the localization of the Qur'anic dialect in this area, it could be a good match for the Qur'anic text. But of course, this is not Mecca and Medina, and it would place the Qur'an's genesis in a decidedly different location.

THE QUR'ANIC DIALECT AND THE ORIGINS OF THE QUR'AN

The remaining witnesses to the Qur'anic dialect, the Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment and the early Islamic papyri, show more substantial evidence of direct correspondence with the language of the Qur'an, and it seems clear that these documents do in fact reflect the same linguistic tradition. Let us consider, then, what we may discern from this historical evidence regarding the locations where this dialect was in use. The origins of the Qur'an itself remain a question, and so we must leave that question to the side for this purpose: indeed, the location of its production in time and space is the variable that we are trying to solve. I have not the slightest doubt that many scholars of early Islam will think this exercise absurd in the extreme, so firm is their faith in the traditional narrative of the Qur'an's Hijazi origins. Yet, as I hope to have persuaded those readers who have made it this far in the book at least, the context wherein the Qur'an as we now have it was written down into its present form is not made certain in the least by the early Islamic historical tradition. Likewise, the complete absence of any mention of the Qur'an's existence in any source prior to the early eighth century, as we already noted, give further grounds for doubt.

Let me be clear, however: I am not proposing that the Qur'an has absolutely no historical connection to the Hijaz, as, for instance, John Wansbrough famously argued. It is quite possible that Muhammad had a prophetic career in Mecca and Medina, and the traditions of the Qur'an largely reflect many of the things that he taught during that period. Yet, as we have just seen, these teachings and the words of the Qur'an were almost certainly not written down during his lifetime in the Hijaz, but at a later time and in another place or places. Therefore, while we may envision some sort of connection between the Qur'an and the traditions

taught by Muhammad in the Hijaz, it certainly is not a transcript of what he said, accurately recorded in the dialect that he spoke. Nor was it written down by his followers while they were still in the Hijaz. Instead, this process seemingly took place elsewhere in their nascent empire, and perhaps in a dialect that was not actually "Hijazi" but rather one in use in the regions of conquest and occupation.

The additional witnesses to the Qur'anic dialect that Al-Jallad has identified all seem to have been written in the Levant—Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, during the early Umayyad period. Accordingly, on this basis we can conclude with some certainty that the Arabic of the Qur'an corresponds directly with an Arabic dialect that was in use in the newly occupied lands under the Umayyads. Should we not, then, also on this basis conclude also that this was the historical context in which the Qur'an as we have it was composed—during the Umayyad era in Syro-Palestine and Iraq, since it is written in a form of Arabic that was used in this context and is not otherwise well attested? Al-Jallad maintains instead that this peculiar form of Arabic is originally from the Hijaz, and was imported into the Levant by Muhammad's followers, who had brought it with them from the Hijaz. Thus, for Al-Jallad, these Umayyad period documents are actually written in the Hijazi dialect, which, he conjectures, likely became "a prestige dialect spread during the Arab conquests," and which, he further speculates, would have been the dialect adopted by non-Arabic speakers in the new empire of the Believers.⁸⁵ Such a development would certainly not be impossible, but it is entirely hypothetical, with no solid evidence to support it. Yet Al-Jallad is only able to identify this dialect with the Hijaz through the presumption that the Qur'an is written in the spoken dialect of the Hijaz, because he assumes, like the early Arabic grammarians, that it was produced there in the form that we now have it. Yet we do not in fact know this about the Qur'an, and so we cannot presume the provenance of its dialect was the Hijaz. All that we can be certain of, based on the linguistic evidence that we presently have, is that the Qur'anic dialect matches a dialect that was in use in Umayyad Syro-Palestine and Egypt, a dialect that appears to have been favored by the ruling authorities.

Likewise, I am not sure we should presume that the Arabic spoken by Muhammad's followers in the wake of the initial conquests and during the Umayyad period would have necessarily been a pure Hijazi dialect, even if that is where many of the movement's leaders hailed from. By the time Muhammad's followers invaded the Near East, the movement had come to comprise a mixture of all the peoples, and presumably the dialects, of the Arabian Peninsula. Perhaps what we find in the aftermath of the conquests, and in the Qur'an as well, is a kind of dialectal creole, a result of bringing so many Arabic-speaking peoples together in a single community for the first time. One should also consider that as Muhammad's followers burst forth northward from the Arabian Peninsula, they would have immediately encountered the many Arabic speakers on the margins of the Roman and Sasanian Empires, in the northern oases and the Nabatean lands, not to

mention the Arabic speakers already in Syria and Palestine. What, one must ask, was the contribution of these peoples, particularly those Arabs who had been allied with Rome or were themselves Roman citizens, to the Arabic used in Syro-Palestine after the conquests and during the Umayyad period? One would suspect that their usage had a significant influence on the spoken and written Arabic of the Umayyad caliphate. After all, Muhammad's followers were a small minority in the lands they had conquered, being vastly outnumbered by the peoples of the Levant.

Given the admittedly minimal and isolated features of this dialect in two much earlier inscriptions from Dedān, should we assume instead that the Qur'an's dialect reflects that of these northern oases instead? Perhaps as the larger populations of these oasis cities allied themselves with Muhammad's new religious movement, they quickly outnumbered his original followers such that their dialect came to prevail? Indeed, in the absence of much evidence, it would seem that there are a number of hypothetical possibilities. Furthermore, as has been already noted, the Umayyads employed a number of non-Muslims in the caliphal administration, including, most notably, John of Damascus and his father, both of whom were Arabic speakers, presumably of the dialect local to Syria. Is it not therefore possible that the Arabic of Damascus and Palestine would have had a significant impact on the form of Arabic used in Umayyad Syro-Palestine? It seems not unreasonable to suspect that it might have. Nevertheless, in the end the only result that linguistic comparison of the Qur'an yields with any certainty is that the Qur'anic dialect conforms to a type of prestige Arabic that was used in the Levant during the Umayyad period. This finding certainly is entirely consistent with what we have proposed in chapter 2 on the basis of the historical sources: that the Qur'an as we now have it was produced in written form initially in Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia after the conquests, and its final standardization took place under an imperial directive from 'Abd al-Malik and al-Hajjāj.

With respect to the Damascus Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment, as separate from the issue of the Qur'anic dialect more broadly, Al-Jallad proposes to have identified some peculiarities that can distinguish its dialect from that of the Levantine Arabic speakers in late antiquity, although I do not find his reasoning particularly convincing. Such a comparison is possible in the case of this document alone, since its Arabic gloss of the Greek text is written in Greek letters, which include vocalization, in contrast to the Qur'an, the early Arabic papyri, and Arabic inscriptions. Al-Jallad's analysis of the Damascus fragment depends especially on the findings of a recent study that he published on Arabic inscriptions written in the Greek alphabet from southern Syria and Palestine.⁸⁶ On the basis of these inscriptions, he proposes to have reconstructed the distinctive Levantine dialect of Arabic, which he then compares with the Arabic of the Damascus Greek-Arabic fragment. The salient differences between the two, according to Al-Jallad, are found primarily in phonological differences rather than morphology: different Greek consonants and vowels are used to transliterate Arabic equivalents in the two corpora. For

instance, various writings transliterate *ḍ* with either σ , ζ , or δ , and *ẓ* with τ , ζ , or δ . Likewise, in some cases, the *l* of the definite article is assimilated to the consonant of the following noun (for the sun consonants), while in other cases it is not written thus. Also, there are often differences in the way Arabic vowels are represented with various Greek counterparts. The only difference not based on different conventions of transliteration is that the Damascus fragment twice uses the '*alladī*' form of the relative pronoun ($\epsilon\lambda\lambda\epsilon\delta\iota$), a form that so far seems to be absent from these Arabic inscriptions written with Greek letters.⁸⁷

How reliably, then, can such phonological differences distinguish the Damascus Greek-Arabic fragment and its dialect, the Qur'anic dialect, from a proposedly distinctive Levantine dialect of Arabic? Not very, I would suggest, with due respect to the painstaking analysis that Al-Jallad has put into studying the various Greek-Arabic inscriptions from this region. The problem is not with the analysis itself but rather with the assumptions that are made concerning the nature of the texts that have been studied. Firstly, there is the general quality of the inscriptions themselves. Most of the information is drawn from the shortest of texts, and overwhelmingly the data are merely proper names, for people and places, transcribed onto a stela or a tombstone.⁸⁸ This hardly seems to be a sufficient dataset to serve as the basis for reconstructing a distinctive dialect. It does give us some indication of how various individuals in the region understood the correlation between Arabic and Greek pronunciation, as these languages were spoken by these individuals and in the various regions. And therein lies the problem. There simply was no standard in place for transliterating Arabic into Greek, such that we can draw any real consistency from the inscription of these proper names. As Al-Jallad himself observes of these transliterations, the results "were surely not part of scribal training; thus with the exception of a few cases, their spellings do not reflect a fixed tradition. Instead, they are the result of the attempts by scribes to approximate Arabic words."⁸⁹ Al-Jallad somehow finds assurance in this disorder, leading him to conclude rather astonishingly that these inscriptions "are therefore a much more reliable source of contemporary pronunciation than the fixed orthographic conventions of Semitic chancelleries."⁹⁰ How this should follow, I simply do not understand.

To draw such broad conclusions on the basis of highly irregular evidence is, to put it mildly, unconvincing and unwarranted. To the contrary, the persistent variation evident among the transcriptions means that the data are not reliable but instead reflect varying individual interpretations of what Greek letter should be used as the equivalent for an Arabic phoneme. Consider how varied transliteration can be even in modern scholarship, in the Romanization of Arabic words. My "Hijaz" is Al-Jallad's "Ḥigāz," which could also be "Ḥijāz" or "Ḥiḡāz." Likewise, one can transliterate with or without consonantal assimilation: the word for "sun," *al-shams*, can also be written *as-shams* or even *aš-šams* or *al-šams* depending on preference: all are correct representations of the same Arabic letters and none

indicates any sort of dialectical variation. One must additionally take into full consideration the fact that Greek pronunciation seems to have varied regionally and was also in flux already in late antiquity, particularly in regard to vowels and also in areas where Greek may have been more marginal, such as regions where Arabic was widely used.⁹¹ One need only look at a Coptic manuscript from late antiquity to see how fluid Greek spelling could be, particularly in the case of individuals who did not have high levels of literacy in Greek. Even in contemporary English, some of us must regularly confront the nagging problem of those who would transliterate the Greek Στέφανος (incorrectly) as Steven, Stefan, or Stephan, rather than as Stephen (which obviously is the correct form). Accordingly, it seems unreasonable to assume that we can somehow retro-transliterate these haphazardly rendered names and brief expressions with any accuracy so as to be able to faithfully reconstruct a dialect.

Therefore, we are left with only the form of relative pronoun in the Damascus fragment as potentially significant. Yet while Al-Jallad notes that “*ʔalla*-based relative pronouns are unknown in the Levant,” he identifies only a single example from the Levant where an alternative form of the pronoun is used, the fourth-century CE Namārah inscription, a Nabatean inscription from southern Syria.⁹² Can this solitary instance prove that this form of the pronoun was normative for Levantine Arabic in the seventh century CE, any more than the Damascus fragment could prove the opposite? One must admit the possibility that the *ʔalla*-based form entered the usage sometime between the inscription and the fragment, yet this would hardly require the importation of a Hijazi dialect as the only possible explanation for such a change. The data simply do not seem sufficient, in my view, to draw the kind of larger conclusions that Al-Jallad has proposed. Moreover, other scholars have recently argued, persuasively and on the basis of the same evidence, that the Qur'an's dialect instead most resembles the Arabic used in areas of Nabatean influence, which, if correct, would draw the language of the Qur'an more closely into the world of the late ancient Levant.⁹³ Indeed, even Al-Jallad himself, when considering the evidence of the Greco-Arabic inscriptions themselves rather than searching for the lost dialect of the ancient Hijaz, observes that “The Graeco-Arabica [of the southern Levant] generally agrees with Qur'ānic orthography.”⁹⁴

Given the inherent ambiguities and uncertainties of these Greek transliterations of various toponyms and anthroponyms, as well as the rather limited evidence otherwise, it is difficult at present to conclude with any certainty that the Qur'an is written in a Hijazi dialect rather than in an Arabic of some other provenance. All we know for certain is that it is written in the prestige dialect of the Umayyad Levant. And yet, even if Al-Jallad is correct that the dialect of the Qur'an is the dialect of the Hijaz, this would afford no indications or assurance that the Qur'an was in fact composed in the Hijaz. Rather, all the evidence points instead to the Qur'an's composition in the Levant during the Umayyad period, when we know that this particular dialect was widely in use. Indeed, outside the isolated and irregular

features of two much earlier inscriptions from Dedān, the only evidence we presently have for the use of this dialect of Arabic is in Umayyad Syro-Palestine and Egypt, the context that is presumably reflected in the Qur'an's use of this same dialect. Even if Muhammad's followers may have brought this language with them to the Levant, it was only there that we have any evidence of them actually using it to write.

In sum, I remain unconvinced by linguistic or any other evidence that we should presume the Qur'an is written in the Arabic dialect of the Hijaz, let alone in the Hijaz itself. To the contrary, the linguistic data would appear to indicate that the Qur'an was written in a prestige Arabic dialect that was in use in the Levant during the Umayyad period; this finding is consistent with both the relevant historical information and the earliest surviving Qur'anic manuscripts. The fact that such differing conclusions can be formed on the basis of the same data in this instance is perhaps best explained by certain contrasting intellectual approaches identified by Crone in her legendary war of words with Robert Serjeant over *Meccan Trade*. As she observes, "Arabists are trained on 'arabiyya, a linguistic paradigm which can be mastered or not mastered, but not refuted. It is normative and governs usage in the texts instead of being governed by it. . . . Arabists, in other words, are trained to know the historical pattern in advance whereas historians are trained to pretend that they know nothing about the past until they find support for it in the sources."⁹⁵ In contrast to the purely linguistic approach, then, I assume we do not know in advance that the wording of the Qur'an was fixed in the Hijaz and written in the Hijazi dialect, such that it may be judged as the normative standard for both this dialect and the Qur'an's history. And based on a historical-critical approach to all of the relevant sources, the Qur'an's gradual production in the lands of conquest, with a final standard version promulgated by 'Abd al-Malik and al-Hajjāj, seems to be the most probable genealogy for the canonical Qur'an. When the Qur'an is viewed from this perspective, the linguistic data looks rather different, yet it is not incompatible in the least with the hypothesis of its final composition in Umayyad Syro-Palestine, which, in fact, the data seem to support.

CONCLUSIONS: THE ORAL QUR'AN AND THE LITERATE QUR'AN

We are therefore left to conclude that, according to the current state of our evidence, the social and cultural context for Muhammad's new religious movement was in fact a nonliterate, tribal society where the use of writing was virtually nonexistent. The fundamentally nonliterate nature of the seventh-century Hijaz should also sufficiently dispel any fantasy that Muhammad's Mecca and Yathrib were somehow integrated with the broader late ancient world and permeated with its culture, like a Palmyra or Petra of the Hijaz.⁹⁶ The most recent studies of the Qur'an's linguistic environment have identified conditions that make it extremely

improbable, if not even effectively impossible, that the Qur'an was written down in the Hijaz during Muhammad's lifetime, or even shortly after his death. As we have seen, both Robin and Macdonald, perhaps the two leading experts on such matters, have told us that writing was effectively not in use in Muhammad's Arabia: once again, as Robin avers, "writing was hardly practiced at all in the time of Muhammad."⁹⁷ Consequently, even as rudimentary scripts were available for writing the language, as evidenced especially by the doodlings of desert herdsmen, the societies of the central Hijaz remained nonliterate. Unless Robin and Macdonald are far off the mark in their conclusions, it is hard to see how any of Muhammad's teachings would have been written down in these circumstances, even in short fragments on bones and stones. And according to what appears to be a fairly broad scholarly consensus, in this context writing was entirely neglected for the production and transmission of cultural and religious texts, which seemingly would include the traditions that eventually gave rise to the Qur'an.

Consequently, in the nonliterate cultures of the Hijaz there would have been effectively no inclination to write down Muhammad's teachings, since orality was the privileged, prestige medium for such cultural material. As Assmann reminds us, in a culture that was fundamentally oral, "it was anything but normal for a society to write down its oral tradition."⁹⁸ By all indications, writing in late ancient Arabia was primarily a simple pastime, a sort of sudoku of the desert. For comparison, we would note that for much the same reason—a lack of literacy—scholars have similarly excluded any possibility that the traditions of the New Testament gospels were written down soon after Jesus's death by eyewitnesses. Instead, they circulated orally for a few decades before they began to be written down. Yet Jesus's followers, in contrast to Muhammad's, were illiterate despite living within a highly literate culture that valued writing (Second Temple Period Judaism), and they lived in the shadow of a major Roman city, Sepphoris (less than two hours' walk from Nazareth, and less than seven from Tiberias). The illiteracy of Muhammad's early followers seems only more certain, given their historical setting within a nonliterate, tribal society in a remote and desolate location. Given such conditions, "there was little reason or incentive, with regard to the population at large, to write down traditions as a matter of course."⁹⁹

Accordingly, the doctrines that Muhammad taught his followers must have circulated among them for some time in a purely oral form; such a conclusion seems inescapable if we wish follow the Islamic tradition and locate Muhammad and his new religious movement in the central Hijaz. Most likely, the Qur'an only began to be written down after Muhammad's followers expanded northward and took control of Syro-Palestine and Iraq. As they soon found themselves among large numbers of Jews and Christians with their prominent and authoritative collections of written scripture, Muhammad's followers must have gradually felt the impulse to codify a scripture of their own based on what they remembered of Muhammad's teachings. Likewise, as the end of the world remained in abeyance,

the eschatological convictions of Muhammad's followers would have correspondingly diminished, awakening them to the need to preserve Muhammad's words more accurately for future generations. Thus, they began to put the teachings of Muhammad into writing as they were able to remember them, in multiple efforts that were initially undertaken independently in the lands of conquest. The peculiar dialect in which the Qur'an is written seems to confirm that these were the conditions in which these sacred traditions were first put into writing: the Qur'an's dialect matches most closely the prestige form of Arabic used in the lands of the conquest during the early Umayyad period.

Presumably the Believers began by first making shorter collections drawn from the memories of various individuals and groups within the larger community following their conquests and the resulting encounter with widespread literacy in the newly occupied lands. These initial efforts to write down what Muhammad had taught arose both as the result of an increasing need for memory aids and also in order to manage a growing and diverse tradition. Nevertheless, these collections were almost certainly not yet considered closed and complete but were still open, flexible, and subject to influence from oral tradition: they were a work in process, steadily gathering and forming the community's collective memory of its origins. These early compendia were then combined into larger and larger collections, along with additional traditions and revisions, one assumes, that would eventually emerge as the divergent versions of the Qur'an preserved in the regional "companion" codices, which likely still were not fully closed and static. Finally, the traditions of these regional versions, along with presumably other written and oral traditions, were fashioned into the imperial canonical codex under 'Abd al-Malik's supervision, and this version was then progressively enforced as the only allowed version of the Qur'an across the empire. Ultimately, this version would displace all its rivals completely, establishing a consequent consistency and standardization of the Qur'anic text that could only be possible with such deliberate imperial intervention and policing. We will have more to say directly about this process of the Qur'an's move to a written form later in chapter 8.

Nevertheless, a number of scholars have maintained that the literary qualities of the Qur'an, as we now have it, preclude any possibility of such an extended oral transmission. The stylistic elements of the Qur'an, so they would argue, are simply not possible without written transmission. I would in fact agree that this is largely correct—the only questions are when, where, and by whom these stylistic elements were introduced. Many scholars of course insist that these features are the work of Muhammad himself, in dialogue with the other members of his new religious movement. Such an assumption is, as we have noted, essential for the synchronic literary reading of the Qur'an within Muhammad's lifetime that has recently become fashionable in some quarters—as opposed to the diachronic historical-critical study of the text, the approach that we have preferred. The proponents of this synchronic literary approach therefore insist that the Qur'anic

text—in the form that it has come down to us—preserves the words of Muhammad, “the proclaimer himself, who ultimately gave the text its verbal and literary form.”¹⁰⁰ Yet it is at the same time an assumption that, according to advocates of this approach, “can only be proven through the results of a literary description of the Qur’an,” an endeavor that ultimately amounts to assuming in advance what one aims to prove.¹⁰¹ For these scholars, “the most important goal” of Qur’anic studies is “an understanding of the suras themselves that meets the demands of literary critical scholarship.”¹⁰² And so, in this approach, literary criticism holds pride of place, and all other methods stand in an explicitly subordinate position. Indeed, the confident attribution of the entire text of the Qur’an as we now have it to Muhammad himself effectively obviates any possibility of an historical-critical approach to the text. And not only does this literary approach effectively dispense with any genuine historical criticism, but it also is not even consistent with what the early Islamic tradition reports concerning the early history of the Qur’an. Accordingly, its advocates will insist that the various reports from the Islamic historical tradition relating the need to collect the traditions of the Qur’an “must therefore be considered a strong exaggeration.”¹⁰³

Yet Muhammad himself is, obviously, not the only possible source of these literary qualities, the presence of which no one would deny. For generations of Qur’anic research, innumerable scholars have held exactly the opposite understanding of the text—namely, that these features were introduced only later on, during the collection and codification of the Qur’an.¹⁰⁴ Wansbrough argues as much persuasively in his *Qur’anic Studies*, noting that only in their final redaction did the traditions of the Qur’an “achieve a kind of stylistic uniformity by resort to a scarcely varied stock of rhetorical convention.” The originally independent pericopes were only sewn together at a later stage using this “limited number of rhetorical conventions,” whose repeated use can “account both for the repetitive character of the document and for what is undeniably its stylistic homogeneity.” Indeed, even the lengthiest of Qur’anic suras, sura 2, “The Cow,” seems to have been produced in such a manner by joining a variety of older and shorter traditions using these rhetorical devices to fashion a more coherent whole.¹⁰⁵ These stylistic qualities are therefore secondary and superficial to the text and its traditions. This consensus has recently received strong validation from Andrew Bannister’s effort to identify oral-formulaic elements in the Qur’an. Bannister’s study of these features convincingly detects clear “breaks” within suras, using a computer-assisted analysis that largely validates the similar hypotheses about the Qur’an previously advanced by Richard Bell.¹⁰⁶ Bell and Montgomery Watt also understood the Qur’an to be a composite text fashioned from earlier, much shorter units of tradition, which are often found in a state of disjointed juxtaposition.¹⁰⁷ De Prémare, too, has more recently articulated a similar model of the Qur’an’s composition out of many smaller fragments that initially circulated independently, a position that Harald Motzki identifies as in fact the prevailing view among scholars of early Islam.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, if one seeks to identify the specific context in which the Qur'an's more unifying stylistic elements could have been added to the text, there are numerous other possibilities beside Muhammad himself. And, given the nonliterate context in which Muhammad lived and his movement took shape, the suggestion that he introduced these features is, *prima facie*, highly unlikely. What is far more probable is that these features were introduced to the Qur'an only during the process of systematically establishing a single, final, authoritative version, resulting in the imperial Qur'an produced and imposed under 'Abd al-Malik and al-Hajjāj. Although Bell and Watt believed that the Qur'an had been collected into its canonical form much earlier, under Uthman, they nevertheless also concluded that the elements of literary unity within the Qur'ān, such as they are, were introduced only later on during the process of weaving these smaller fragments together into larger units.¹⁰⁹ Many of these stylistic similarities in the Qur'anic text are not at altogether different from those that unite the Johannine corpus of the New Testament, for instance. Accordingly, one imagines the introduction of these literary features in a similar sort of context, a kind of "school" or "circle" marked by adherence to certain theological themes and styles.¹¹⁰ Without a doubt, the group of scholars selected by 'Abd al-Malik and al-Hajjāj must have constituted such a theologically coherent group, whose work appears to have been closely supervised in order to achieve a certain standard. Finally, we should also note that the introduction of these literary qualities only in the process of moving from orality to writing receives strong validation from the anthropological study of oral traditions and oral transmission of texts in other contexts. As a general rule, it turns out, such elements of "greater architecture" present in the literary form of a text belong exclusively to the written form, rather than to oral poetry, and usually they find their way into a text precisely at the moment of its transition from orality to writing.¹¹¹ So, it seems, we should also understand the literary qualities of the Qur'anic text.

Thus, the most probable circumstances for understanding the early history of the Qur'anic text lead us to the conclusion that its contents circulated for a significant period of time in the absence of any written collection of Muhammad's teachings. The linguistic history of the Hijaz at the time of Muhammad leaves this all but certain. The community only began to write down Muhammad's words, as they had come to remember them, later on and primarily amid the broader context of the "sectarian milieu" of the late ancient Near East. No doubt these memories of Muhammad's teaching continued to change and grow even after they had begun to be written down: this is not at all uncommon, especially at the time when a community is making the shift from orality to writing. The Qur'an, therefore, only achieved its invariable, archetypal form sometime around the turn of the eighth century, it would seem. The circumstances of extended oral transmission and the existence of rival versions of the Qur'an establish a very high likelihood that the memories of Muhammad's teachings would have changed significantly during the period between his death and the establishment of their now

canonical version. Oral transmission and human memory—individual as well collective—are highly malleable and fallible in many important respects, as we will now see in two following chapters. The deficiencies of both introduce the strong possibility that Muhammad's followers re-remembered his teachings in significant ways as they found themselves in a new context, surrounded by and in dialogue with Jews, Christians, and other religious communities of the late ancient Near East.