ISLAM & TRAVEL
IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London
The School of the Desert

Linguists and Bedouins

Addressing the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Ma‘mūn (r. 813–33) in the preface to his History of the Kings of the Arabs of Antiquity, Pseudo-Asma‘ī writes:

You have commanded me to gather up all the narratives and the traditions concerning the kings of the ancient Arabs; all that can be known about their politics, their wisdom, their poetry, their prayers, and their manner of administering what God has delivered over to them as well as their remarkable deeds. Despite all my efforts, I have found that there was little information concerning them. To find what relates to them is difficult because of the disappearance of their narratives and the effacing of their traces. I have nonetheless made my mount sweat traveling among the Bedouin tribes in order to interrogate the transmitters of ancient narratives and the memorizers of the “Happy Days” about such topics. Among those whom I have been able to approach, I have interrogated the genealogists at the same time that I gathered what the long-lived old men had from their ancestors, with the result that, when all was said and done, despite all my efforts, I collected only a small quantity of narratives. By which I have obeyed the august imperial decree.1

Although modern philologists and paleographers deny that this chronicle was the work of the great Basra philologist, it is clear that its anonymous author offers an accurate pastiche of the method typical of prose writers and philologists of the eighth century. The new class of secular men of letters, of which Asma‘I was a founder, often pushed its own members, body and soul, onto the dusty roads to knowledge. Emerging in part at least from the religious world, that class certainly did not exclude all religious consideration from its linguistic inquiry. But at the same time, the specificity of its activities permitted it to demote pious motives as the sole source of creation and justification of a domain of knowledge. Its emergence, albeit partial, from religion thus enabled it to give sufficiently forceful backing to secular curiosity and interests to justify the linguistic investigations that its members undertook among the Bedouins. Thus, like the collectors of traditions who went to Mecca and Medina with the sole aim of meeting transmitters of hadith, philologists and prose writers went to those same holy places of Islam, not to carry out their ritual obligations, but uniquely in the hope of meeting Bedouins and being able to interrogate them on their speech, their poetry, and their traditions. We have narratives that portray Abū ‘Amr ibn al-‘Alā‘ (d. 1547/7707), held to be the founder of the philological school of Basra, in Mecca, gathering verse from a member of the Banu ‘Udhra tribe, poetry to which Arab tradition attaches the invention of courtly love. Similarly, his contemporary and compatriot Hasan ibn Ja‘far al-Dibā‘I, who, it seems, “never took to the road, never went anywhere for any reason without having on him his wooden tablets,” is shown filling one of those tablets with verse declaimed by a Bedouin in front of the Ka‘ba.

Not only the great masters from the big cities of Iraq, but scholars in other Muslim provinces in search of information about the Arab language also sought out Bedouins. One anecdote is significant of the increased number of such excursions. We are in Kufa in the study circle of the lexicographer Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 231/845).

The master is explaining some difficult verses to about a hundred people of various nations. Two listeners who are whispering to one another finally annoy him: he interrupts them and asks one of them: “Where are you from?” “From Andalusia,” answers one intimidated candidate for wisdom. “And you?” “From Isbījah” (in the Sind). Astonished to see that his school attracts pupils from the outer limits of the Muslim world (and perhaps proud of having listeners from such distant lands), the learned linguist declaims some impromptu verse, which all his students dutifully noted down. Some of these young people who came from distant lands acquired a reputation as a philologist or a grammarian in Iraq. In particular, they came from the eastern regions of the Muslim world, as did the famous Akhshaf of Balkh (d. 215/830) and Abū Hātim al-Sijsīstānī (d. 255/868), both of whom settled in Basra, attaching themselves to Ibn al-‘Arabi’s school of grammar and language.

From its founding, the Basra school developed a purist conception of language that made Bedouin speech both its literary ideal and its linguistic standard. Enthusiasm for Bedouin speech reached its height under the reign of caliph Hārūn ar-Rashid (r. 786–809). In Basra, two pupils of the master played a fundamental role in the promotion of this linguistic purism: Abū ‘Ubayda (d. 210/825) and Asma‘I (d. 213/828). But the school of Kufa was not excluded from this movement to promote Bedouin speech, in the person of two of its most eminent representatives, Kūsā‘ (d. 183/799) and Fārā‘ (d. 207/822). It is known that the first of these, besides having studied under masters in Kufa, frequented the study circle of Khalīl

7. One ninth-century source describes the study seminar of Abī ‘Amr ibn ‘Alā‘ (d. 1547/7707) in Basra as frequented by “searchers for knowledge, men of letters, Bedouin connoisseurs of clear and correct languages, and delegations come from the desert”: Ibn al-Nadīm, Fihrist, 41. That same source shows another member of the school of Basra “who was not a Bedouin” traveling in the desert in the mid-eighth century and “learn from the Bedouins, connoisseurs of the Arab language”: ibid., 48. Abū Bakr al-Sūfī (d. 335/946) wrote a Kitāb Akhkār Abī ‘Amr ibn al-‘Alā‘ that unfortunately has not come down to us: Ibn Khalīkān, Wafayát al-Ayyān, 4339.
8. Qīfī, Inshā‘ al-Rimā‘īn, ed. Muhammad Abu al-Fadl Ibrāhim, 3 vols. (Cairo: al-Hayyāt al-Ma‘ṣīya al-Ammah, 1989), 2:567, 377. That linguistic ideal did not become established without hesitation and polemics, however. In Basra itself there were learned linguists who rejected the claimed purity of language of the Bedouins. We are told that the Qur‘an specialists and grammarians ‘Abd-Allāh ibn Isḥāq (d. 177/735) and ‘Isa ibn ‘Umar (d. 449/660) “spoke against the Bedouin Arabs” and attacked their reputation as connoisseurs of pure language. The second of these is even reported to have denounced the great poet Nābīgha al-Dhubaysī for societies that displayed defects of language. Unlike Abī ‘Amr ibn ‘Alā‘, the two nonconformists preached, in imitation of Iranian jurists of their age, a more purist kind of speech.
Chapter Two

ibn Ahmad (d. 175/791) in Basra and spent time with the Bedouins of the Hejaz. It seems that the rivalry between the two schools did not exclude convergences, or frequentation of the masters of the adversary school: just as Kiswa went from Kufa to Basra to study, Abu Zayd al-Ansari (d. 214/829), another great figure of the Basra school who studied with its founder, went to Kufa to frequent its masters.

Still, the Basra school deserves credit for having developed a method, which consisted in going to seek out grammatical, lexical, and rhetorical materials among the Bedouins. The lexicographer Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933) relates an anecdote that speaks to that point. Among a group of men of letters and book buyers gathered in the booksellers’ quarter of Basra in a shop that, as was true of all bookshops, also functioned as a reading room and a literary club was a man from Kufa, the seat of a rival school of philology, as we have seen. As the man leaned through the Reform of the Language of the Kufa grammarians Ibn al-Sikkit (d. 245/854), he praised the work’s author and, taking advantage of the opportunity, lectured the others on the superiority of the Kufa linguists over those of Basra. The Basrans listening to him were scandalized to hear such statements being made in their town, and they loudly accused the man of provocation. The affair seemed to them so serious that they brought it to Ruyyash’s (d. 257/870), a representative of the Basra school of philology who lived in the neighborhood. Ruyyash, who had been the pupil of Asma’a and of Abu Zayd al-Ansari, dismissed the outsider’s offensive remarks scornfully: “We have learned the language of gazelle hunters and jerboa eaters; they have learned their language from the inhabitants of cultivated lands [Sawad] and makers of white flour.” In other words, the linguists of Basra had acquired knowledge from the Bedouins, and those of Kufa from sedentary peasants. The language of the Bedouins was regarded to be more pure, clearer, and more beautiful. According to Ruyyash, it was thanks to his masters that the most unchanged variants of the Bedouin language had become “the depository and the guardian of the Arab linguistic ideal in its inimitable perfection.”

Bolstered by this nostalgic conception of language, the scholars of Basra began to study the Bedouins’ speech. Basra, situated at the edge of the desert, was all the more appropriate for that enterprise because it was a crossroads for Bedouin caravans from Bahrain, Yamama, and the Najd. Even before the learned linguists of Basra went to the Bedouins in order to collect speech data, their poetry, their genealogies, and their “propitious days,” the Bedouins came to them, thanks to the requirements of economic exchange.

The Bedouins who frequented Basra camped in an area three miles outside the city known as the Mirbad, which functioned as a trading center for the entire region. That was where the linguists chose to settle because, as with Arab fairs before Islam (and like the suqs of Morocco studied by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz), far from being a simple place for commercial exchanges, the Mirbad was a space for communication and in itself a veritable cultural institution, where poets and itinerant singers came to recite their works. Ru’ba (d. 145/763) recited his poems there before audiences made up of members of the Bedouin tribe of the Tamim. Farazdaq and Jarir engaged in ferocious poetic jousts there under the arbitrage of such experts as the poet and tribal lord Ra’i (d. 907/709). It was thus here that Asma’a (d. 213/828) came to seek the gharib al-lugha, “the rare and obscure words” used by the Bedouins. One narrative shows him telling his master about one of his excursions into the suq: “One Day I went to see Abu ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ala’. When he saw me, he asked me, ‘Where are you coming from, Asma’a’? ‘From Mirbad,’ I responded. ‘Show me what you have brought back,’ he said. Then I read to him what I had noted on my tablets. After having meditated on six rare words, the meanings of which are:

10. On the Kufa school, see Mahdi Makhzumi, Muraqrat al-Kufa wa Mubanabujah fi Dirasat al-Lugab wa T’Nahar (Baghdad: Marw’ut Dár al-Mas’ufah, 1374 AH/1955).
11. Ibn al-Nadim, Fihrist, 64; Ibn al-Aribi, Nuzhat al-Albah fi Tabaqat al-Ushah, ed. Muhammad Abû al-Fadh al-Ibrîhim (Cairo: Dar nahdâf Mîsir, 1967), 200. Two or three generations earlier, Abû Muhammad al-Yazidi (d. 202/817), a disciple of the founder of the Basra school, had treated colleagues in Kufa with the same opprobrium: “We (in Basra) have always done our best to draw consequences from analogy with the original language of the Arabs (the Bedouins), until the day when people started to form analogies based on the language of the old men of Qatrub, a region of Iraq known for its fine wines: Anbar, Nuzhat, 83.

15. On these two poets of tribal particularism, see ibid., 3:484–84, 497–505. More than Farazdaq, however, "Jarir remained attached to his native desert for his entire life," "all his life, he was the spokesman and the champion of the Qaysites against the Yemenites."
were unclear to him, he exclaimed, ‘You have become an expert in *għarrīb*,
Asma’ī’."17

Abū ‘Ubayd ibn Sallām (d. 224/838), a linguist and jurist from Herāt,
in what is now Afghanistan, provides another illustration of this effort
to collect hapax in usage among the Bedouins. In 795 a trip to Iraq also took
him to Basra, Kufa, and Baghdad. Asma’ī, his principal reference, was also
one of his masters.18

But it was not just linguists who frequented the Mirbad. Prose writers
and poets came there to perfect their mastery of the Arabic language. The
famous Jāḥiz (d. 255/868), born in Basra and a student of Asma’ī and his
colleagues, learned “the purity of the language” there from the mouths
of its presumed speakers.19 The poet Abū Nuwās (d. 200/819), who studied
under the direction of one of Asma’ī’s codisciples, did the same. Jāḥiz
walked in the steps of one of the principal founders of Arabic prose; Abū
Nuwās in those of Bashshār ibn Burd, the man who revolutionized Arabic
poetry.20

Some of the Bedouin informants who frequented the Mirbad became
well known. Ibn al-Nadīm’s *Catalogue* gives an entire list of them. Such
men did not hesitate to attend the linguists’ study circles. We know, for
example, that the circle of Yūnūs ibn Habīb (d. 183/799) attracted “stu-
dents in language and purists from among the Bedouins and from the
desert.”21 The circle of the founder of the Basra school was never without
Bedouin informers. One of these seems to have known the speech habits
of the Hejaz so well that all the linguists in Basra referred to his judgments
and explanations when it was a question of words or expressions from
that area.22 There were even women among these privileged informers. One
narrative shows Abū Hārîm al-Sijjātnī interrogating a woman who was
well known to collectors of linguistic information about a variety of
grain for which he knew only the Persian term.23 Ibn al-Nadīm’s *Catalogue*
gives an entire list of woman informers.24 We learn that the more cultivated

17. Yaḥyā, Muḥammad ibn Sallām, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, 7 vols. (Leipzig, 1835–73; reprinted, 6
20. The prose writer in question is the political writer Ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d. ca. 762); he and his
contemporary Bashshār ibn Burd were both trained in Basra.

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Bedouins, after having frequented the circles of the city masters, might themselves begin to teach and compose linguistic monographs. The *Catalogue* cites several prototypes of such works.

In Basra, Kufa, and Baghdad, Bedouins of that sort were considered to be the repositories of the speech habits of their tribes and became familiar figures in the study circles and literary salons. Their powers of judgment were acknowledged everywhere. When the ‘Abbasid vizier Yahyā the
Barmecide, an enlightened man who played a major role in the develop-
ment of knowledge by his patronage, held a debate between Sibawayh
(d. 180/796?), representing the Basra school, and Kīsā‘ī (d. 183/799?),
the leader figure in the rival school of Kufa, the best Bedouin connoisseurs
d of desert speech habits were called in. They voted for the Kufa represen-
tative. Sibawayh emerged from this contest totally defeated. If his biog-
raphers can believe the, “great affliction” of having undergone this
humiliation was the cause of his death soon after. To defend his memory,
his followers claimed that the judges were partisan, “Arabs of the Hutma,
among whom Kīsā‘ī had stayed to take their language.”25 In another po-
lemical exchange that had been organized in Basra between Asma’ī, the
local master of philology, and Dābī, representing Kufa philology, it was a
young man of the Banū Sa’d tribe, known for his vast store of memorized
Bedouin poetry, who was asked to judge between the two.26

The Stay in the Desert

The Basra scholars were not content to collect samples of speech from
Bedouins from the desert, or Bādīya, the steppes of Suria and Iraq, who
came to their cities: they also took themselves into the desert to gather
them from the mouths of other Bedouins, the authenticity of whose
speech they judged to be intact because they had lived far from the cen-
ters of urban life. They looked down on mixed populations of Arabs and
non-Arabs, to the point of thinking them a threat to the purity of the
Bedouins’ language. This means that in the corrupting cities, the privile-
geled informers became themselves suspect and unworthy of trust. Their

number of examples of the abridgement of Bedouin experts: see *Kitāb al-Majallī al-Madkharah
bi-Ulama bi-Lughā*, microfilm no. 232, Maḥfūẓ al-Mukhtār al-‘Arabiyya (Institut Arabe des
Manuscrits), Cairo. On these Bedouin informers, see Régis Blachère, “Les savants irakiens
et leurs informateurs bedouins aux XIe–XVe siècles de l’Hégire,” in *Mélanges offerts à William
acus):*
long stays among the sedentary population and the city dwellers were held against them. There are many anecdotes that show Basra scholars scolding their Bedouin informers either for having mispronounced a word, made a grammatical mistake, or given an inaccurate meaning for a word, or for being unable to understand and explicate a poem of their contributors.

Abū 'Amr ibn al-'Alī', the founder of the school, seems to have been one of the first to travel in the desert. He had lived in the Hijaz, studying in Mecca and in Medina; in Yemen, where his father had taken refuge for political reasons; and in Syria. In a narration transmitted by the mystic Tustari (d. 283/896) he connects his experience of the desert with the persecutions of the pitiless governor of Iraq, Hajjāj (694–714). In this fragment he tells us: "We fled Hijāj by taking refuge in the Desert of the Arabs [Bābī]ya]. We stayed there for a while, moving from one place to another. One day as I was coming out of one of these places, I heard an old Bedouin declaring verse [on patience, announcing the death of the tyrant]." A fanatical admirer of the pure language of the pre-Islam Bedouin poets, he mistrusted the quality of the language of the modern poets, whose compositions he disliked. Before his disciples he often compared the poetry of the earlier men to "pieces of brocade," whereas that of the later ones was like "pieces of raw wool." He seems to have remained faithful to that opinion, making it a rule to support his philological commentaries only with citations from the poets of the jāhiliyya, the epoch of Arabic paganism. He is reported to have gathered together and written down such a massive amount of ancient Bedouin poetry that a room in his house was barely large enough to hold it all. A narrative that shows him in Mecca in the process of interrogating a nomad who was passing through allows us a glimpse of his investigations. Another narrative shows him, again in Mecca, pursuing other aspects of his investigations and exposing a Bedouin from Oman to a genuine interrogation:

"What tribe do you come from?"
"From the Asads."
"Which, in particular?"
"The Nahd."
"What region are you from?"
"From Oman."
"And where does the purity of your speech come from?"
"We live in an isolated land."

After this exchange, Abū 'Amr asks the man to describe his homeland and tell him how its inhabitants lived. Rather than just questioning his informer about his tribe's speech habits, he asks ethnographic questions about the social and material life of his interlocutor's people (their modes of production, their foods and diet, their habitat, and more) and about the ecological milieu in which they lived. Everything about the Bedouins' natural setting interested him. His questions focused on the morphology of the soil, the climate, plants, domestic and wild animals, and even insects. He remained a scholar, however, operating as a linguist, not as an ethnographer, a geologist, or a zoologist. After an interview he would sift through these various themes and write them down in separate monographs, just as Asma', for example, wrote a Book of Trees, a Book of Palm Trees, and a Book of Plants. Such inventories might in turn be included in larger works, such as the Book of Descriptions of Nadr ibn Shumayl (d. 203/819), another member of the Basa school. This work is divided into five volumes: 1. "The Creation of Man, Nobility, Generosity, and Women; 2. "Dens, Habitats, Mountains, and Hills;" 3. "Camels;" 4. "Cattle, Birds, the Sun, the Moon, the Night, the Day, Milks, Wells, Basins, Beverages . . ."; and 5. "Cultivated Plants, the Vine, Trees, the Wind, Clouds, Rain." It is evident that little preconceived or rigorous order presides over the organization of these lists. That absence of rigor is true of both the monographs and the compendiums of the period.

Abū 'Amr's students continued to make a stay in the desert a constituent part of their work of collecting sociohistorical and linguistic materials. 'Abd Allāh ibn Sa'īd al-Umāwī, "who was not a Bedouin," is described as a voyager of the desert and a collector of tribal speech patterns from .
the mouth of *fusabāḥ* of pure and correct speech. 34 Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī (d. 214/829) claims that he had only three authorities: the master of the Basra school, a prose writer from Kufa, and the Bedouins of the desert. 35 In the introduction to his *Book of Precious Things*, for example, he indicates that all of the "transmissions" consigned to his pages came to him from his Kufa master and some "Bedouin Arabs." Among the latter, the groups most cited are the Banū Kuwayb, the Banū `Uqayl ("men and women"), the Banū Tamīm, and the Banū Asad. 36 Defining his approach elsewhere, he notes that when he states "the Arabs said," he is referring to what he gathered among the Banū Bahr (the tribe of origin of the Prophet), the Banū Kilāb, the Banū Hīilāb, and more generally the inhabitants of Najj (which included Tamīms and Rabi`as, segments of the Banū Asad, and others), all in Medina and its environs. 37

Of the many students of the master of the Basra school, it was incontestably Asma`ī (d. 213/828) who knew the desert, its inhabitants, and its poetry best. Thanks to his prodigious memory, he was reputed to know by heart several thousand poetic works, which explains the nickname "the devil of poetry," 38 given to him by Hārūn al-Rashīd in homage to his virtuosity. Like his own master, however, he valued only the archaic poets. The anecdotes concerning Asma`ī’s stays in the desert are scattered through his successors’ treatises on language. In one of these, we see him traveling with a copyist who might also have been an assistant. 39 In another, he is depicted paying court to a beautiful Bedouin woman near a well, reciting verse to her. 40 In a third account, he is interrogating an adolescent of the Banū Asad tribe, and in a fourth, he encourages a member of the Banū `Amir tribe to recite local poems. A fifth report shows him among the Banū `Anba conversing with a Bedouin woman. Some of these anecdotes describe him in highly unusual situations. In one of them he uses a variety of ingenious arguments to persuade a group of young Bedouin women who are playfully exchanging snatches of poetry to permit him to take notes on what they are saying. They refuse to let him come too near, so he seeks out a discreet place from which he can listen to them and jot down their songs. An old man who sees him watching the young women and who cannot conceive that anyone could be interested in their childish games chides him: "How dare you write down the statements of those miserable dwarfs [a`dān]?" 41 And of course as the old man is scolding the linguist, he adds to his list a word that he did not know and that he notes immediately on his tablet: *dānī*, plural *a`dān*, a term signifying "stupid, imbecile," but also "vile, low, worthy of scorn." 42

Accounts of Asma`ī among the Bedouins are so numerous that a certain number of men of letters specialized in their transmission. The Basra scholar was an insatiable collector of language, as noted by one Bedouin who was astonished to see Asma`ī writing down all of his explanations. 43 The most famous work treating his collections is *The Narrations of Asma`ī* of Raba`i (d. 329/940). 44 One might legitimately suspect that the many more or less romantic anecdotes featuring this great philologist at work in the desert are the work of late medieval authors, but there is an Egyptian papyrus that, according to Nabia Abbott, dates to the early ninth century, which attests that tales of the sort circulated during his lifetime or at least among his immediate pupils. 45 One of Asma`ī’s disciples, Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī (d. 214/829), a great traveler, made several trips into the desert. Explaining his method for collecting linguistic data to one of his students, he states: "I do not say, ‘The Arabs said’ unless I have heard it from the Bedouin tribes of the Bakr, the Banū Kalb, the Banū Kilāb, or those who live in the upper or lower Sāfīla; otherwise I do not say, ‘The Arabs said.’" 46 Following in their masters’ footsteps, Asma`ī’s pupils, like those of Abū Zayd, continued to travel in the desert. 47

When these linguistic pioneers arrived in the desert, the Bedouins received them in the same way that exotic societies welcome anthropologists—that is, with a mixture of amused surprise and curiosity. Asma`ī,
who had plenty of experience in the matter, tells how the language collectors operated in the desert:

I was on a donkey, which I energetically spurred on, in search of haphazard related to traditions, poetry, and language when in the territory of Dariya [not far from Medina], I saw a sort of roof resembling a large parasol of woven hair that sheltered a horse. The shaded space also served as a place for camels to rest and as an enclosure for sheep. I got off near a well that was nearby. I filled the drinking trough with water for my donkey, when a young man came out of the house nearby. He approached me and greeted me. When I responded to his greeting, he said to me: “I see here someone whose clothes are those of a city dweller but whose language is that of a Bedouin!” I answered: “As far as the clothes are concerned, you have seen correctly. As for the language, where is the purity of your expressions? The ease with which you express yourselves? The natural capacity that you have to make [fine] speeches? The spontaneity with which you enrich meanings? We [city dwellers] with our impoverished expression torture the language without ever attaining the aim we seek and expressing what is in our hearts.” [After offering him hospitality, the young man with the noble air asked.] “What makes you come into this rough and harsh land?” “The desire for the fine manners [adab] that adorn those who hold them for their beauty,” Asma’i answered. “And that is the only reason for your coming here? added the young man, astonished. “I have no greater care, no deeper desire, and no more pressing wish!”

This text is interesting for more than one reason, as it dramatizes the city dwellers’ idealized representation of the Bedouin world. Men of letters from the big cities did not take off for the school of the desert uniquely in order to collect instances of the “clear and pure language” of its inhabitants. Thanks to their contact with the Bedouins, they also learned about an ethico-cultural manner of living in this world centered on the muruba’ah, a notion that covers an entire set of social and individual rules having to do with courage, magnanimity, constancy, generosity, and good will. In doing so, linguists and writers portrayed the Bedouin world as the site of an admirable masculine humanity. It is understandable that urban elites felt the urge to become zarif— that is, models of refinement and spiritual elegance—by seeking out civility in the wild Bādiya and among its “spare and rough” inhabitants.

Despite the criticisms of the Basra linguists, who claimed to be closer to the Bedouins than their Kufa colleagues, the Kufa scholars also hastened to the desert to listen to its inhabitants. As with Basra, Bedouin caravans regularly came to Kufa for provisions.49 The Bedouins who regularly frequented the city in the late eighth and early ninth centuries were the Banū Sa’d, the Banū ‘Uqayl, and the Banū Asad. Ibn al-`Arabī (d. 231/849), for example, made inquiries among the two first groups, and Ibn Kunnâṣa among the third.50 A certain number of eminent members of the school made the voyage into the desert. ‘Abū ‘Amrū al-Shaybānī, who died at the age of one hundred in 821, was one of the very first to do so. A linguist who died at the end of the ninth century reports that ‘Abū ‘Amrū al-Shaybānī traveled extensively in the desert with a companion, carrying with him two containers of ink, and that they returned only after having exhausted this supply by taking notes on his “auditions” among the Bedouins. He is in fact credited with having collected the poetry of some eighty tribes.51 Before him, however, the famous Hammād (d. 160/776), called “The Transmitter” (Rāwiya), who in his time was considered one of the greatest connoisseurs of archaic poetry, made the trip into the desert. His biographers portray him investigating among the Banū Asad and the Banū ‘Uqayl.52 We are told that his methods were closest to those of his colleagues from Basra, from whom he attracted some of his students.53 One of these, Khalaf al-Ahmar (d. 179/795), was also known as a collector of archaic poetry and stayed among the Bedouins.54

The greatest desert traveler from Kufa clearly remains Kūsā’i (d. 183/799). After studying with the masters of his home town, he went first to Baghdad, then to Basra, where he followed the teaching of the famous Khalīl ibn Ahmad (d. 175/791), the author (or partial author) of the first

48. On this ideal, see Susanne Enderwitz, “Du Fatā‘ al-Zarif, ou comment on se distingue?”
49. Like the Mitḥāb section of Basra, the Kunāṣa of Kufa was the place for unloading and reloading camel caravans (Massignon) that linked that city to the Bādiya. A place of exchange between city dwellers and nomads, “it became an important center of Bedouin poetry, much like the Mitḥāb of Basra, but on a smaller scale.” Hichem Djäj, Al-Kūfah: Naisseance de la ville islamique (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1986), 278.
51. Ibn al-Nadim, Fihrist, 68; Anbārī, Nazbat, 1:96. He was also a recognized and much-appreciated transmitter of prophetic traditions.
52. Azhari, Tabāhīb al-Lughā, 2:121.
53. He is reported to have said one day regarding a word: “I have heard a thousand Bedouins say the contrary of what Asma’i has collected.” Anbārī, Nazbat, 151.
54. Qiffī, Inbāh, 2:226; Sayyid, Baghīyat al-W‘āb fī Tabāhīb al-Lughā, ed. Muhammad Abi...
dictionary of the Arabic language. One day, his biographers tell us, Kisa'i made the acquaintance of a Bedouin who frequented the master’s circle, and the man reminded him that he was neglecting the purity of language (fatîba) that he had come to Basra to seek. That purity, the Bedouin reminded him, was among the Asad and the Tamîm Bedouins of the Kufa region. The scholar was persuaded to go into the desert, when he learned that the great lexicographer with whom he had come to study had gained his knowledge of the language “from the tribes of the deserts of the Hejaz, the Nejd, and the Thâma.” Carrying with him a large amount of ink and paper, “he entered into the Bâdiya,” returning with a considerable quantity of linguistic and poetic data. The travel narrative contained in manuscript no. 232, Cairo, tells about Kisa'i’s sojourn in the Kufa desert to put himself to the school of the Bedouins. It shows him experiencing both an intellectual initiation and a rupture with the family milieu. At the end of his stay among the Bedouins, he was both a changed man and a jubilant one. “Hunger and fatigue have so strongly changed the shade of my face and the color of my skin that I look like one of them,” he reported. After having learned his host’s language and their poetry, he returned to Kufa, but delayed his return home so that his master and his fellow students could appreciate the transformation that he had undergone in his contact with his Bedouin educators. Although his family had nearly given up hope of ever seeing him again, he went first to the mosque where his master had his study circle. Before all the members of the circle, he displayed the learning that he had brought back from the desert, and it was only when his master had confirmed his achievement that he returned home. This astonishing account of a trip in the desert—the most complete known—has the merit of showing the extent to which any quest for knowledge is an overwhelming intellectual experience and initiation. Kisa'i went into the desert a student and came back out of it a young scholar. He offers proof of this complete change in two ways: he bears signs of it on his person as proof of his virtuosity, and he carries proof of it in his transcriptions and his notebooks. If he feels it imperative to display such proofs to his master and his fellow students, it is because they are validated only by being seen and recognized by competent persons.

Kisa'i encouraged the idea of a stay among the Bedouins as an essential step in any pursuit of philology. His principal student, Farrâ’î (d. 207/822), was obliged to follow the same road that had led his master into the desert. When, toward the end of his life, Farrâ’î had become a fixture at the court of al-Ma’mûn (r. 813–33), the caliph charged him with composing a book that would summarize the basic treatises on grammar and everything “that he had heard from the Bedouins.”

During the second half of the ninth century, even though a stay in the desert remained a much-appreciated move, it was less frequently said that linguists, collectors of poetry, or genealogists had made such a trip. By then scholars were more preoccupied with putting into order the considerable material that their elders had gathered together and had often left in near-total disorder. These later scholars were responsible for what might be called the “Alexandrian moment” in the study of the Arabic language and its products. For many of them, the library replaced the school of the desert. After the figure of the “great transmitter” (râwiyya) of the eighth century and of the author (mâtâllif) that emerged around the beginning of the ninth century, came the time of the editor (muwasim). The new figure was a library man. He worked on a library and he worked in the library: after the extraordinary rise of the book at the end of the eighth century, sovereigns, princes, and the powerful of this world called on his skills in order to constitute or administer their libraries, which were often modeled on that of Alexandria. His role was to gather books, publish editions, and comment on texts so as to set down the lessons to be drawn from them. This means that his activities were both technical and intellectual. They were those of a bibliographer, an editor/publisher, and a mediator between the works, their authors, and their readers. From a technical point of view, he collated the “recensions” in circulation, establishing the text by comparing copies and variants and making choices. Intellectually, he was taking on an immense role, because he was the one who decided what should or should not be published, commented on, or protected by his authority. By the same token, he oriented the intellectual culture of his time and manipulated the reader into accepting the meaning that he preferred. Feared because of his powers, he rendered all written production

55. Anbârî, Nuzhat, 659. Yaqût, Mu’jam al-Buldan, 13:160. Qifît cites several anecdotes concerning his stay among the Bedouins and shows him transcribing their sayings: Qifît, Ikhâl, 2:273. When he returned from the desert he settled in Baghdad, and the caliph Hârûn al-Rashîd designated him the preceptor of his son Amin, who was later caliph, between 809 and 813.

problematic because he could decide that a particular work was authentic and another one was a pastiche, or that one version of a work was worthy of being transmitted and another version unworthy. His preferred operations were sorting, classification, and putting into circulation statements that he often took pains to decontextualize completely. All of this generated specific sorts of works, the most recurrent of which are the collection, the anthology, and the dictionary. This job of putting things into writing gave Islamic culture a new sort of man of letters, unknown before the ninth century: the polygraph. The many offerings that the bookseller Ibn al-Nadim noted in his Catalogue in 997 included one of a tenth-century prose writer whose collection of anecdotes regarding Arabic poets from pre-Islamic antiquity to his own day ran to “60 volumes.” He also lists a collection of “5,000 sheets” containing nothing but the sample verse lines in use among the philologists, a collection of spicier anecdotes about the poets of Islam of “more than 5,000 sheets,” a dictionary of poets of “more than 1,000 sheets,” a dictionary of the grammarians of Basra of “more than 3,000 sheets,” a dictionary of Arabic singers of “more than 1,600 sheets,” and a collection of love poetry of “more than 3,000 sheets.” All in all, this particular polygraph had produced a work of “over 20,000 sheets.” An effort such as this would be unthinkable without the existence of good libraries and a flourishing paper industry. The one fed the other in a dizzying chain of transformations.

There were also political reasons that inspired the great philologists and prose writers of the ninth and tenth centuries to devote themselves to the intense activity of compilation, to the point of neglecting inquiry in the desert. A great insecurity followed the advance of the Qarmatians from Bahrain toward the Hejaz, Iraq, and Syria. Launched in 890, this extremist movement shook the heart of the empire, paralyzing commerce, leading to the depopulation of entire regions, and creating raids on the caravans of pilgrims on their way to Mecca. The terror of believers reached its peak in 930, when the insurgents violated the shrine of the Kaaba and stole the Black Stone. City people came to view the Bedouins who followed the Qarmatians in their politico-religious action in a different light from their eighth-century romantic representation as “great transmitters.” Their image was no longer that of men with a fierce sense of honor and an unshakable loyalty, or that of a generous and hospitable people, but as faithless, lawless robbers as greedy as they were ferocious. An agitated age suddenly recalled that the Qur’an had called them frank “hypocrites.”

Another change—a literary one this time—made the Bedouins “of pure and correct speech” less appealing to the aesthetic tastes of the men of letters of the big cities of Iraq. Whereas, in the early ninth century, listening to Bedouin eloquence was still considered a great pleasure, by the end of the century some agreed with Ibn Bassām (d. 302/914) that their “words are not beautiful,”59 without encountering any objection. The time had past when, asked what people was the best, someone like Ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d. ca. 762), an intellectual of both Persian and Arabic culture, could respond: the Bedouins. The Bedouin Arabs, he states, are “the wisest among the people because of the authenticity of their state of nature [fitra], the equilibrium of the structure [of their humors?], the exactitude of their thought, and the subtlety of their intelligence.”60 This ideal portrait of the nomadic Arab was widely shared among urban men of letters of the time. When the caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775–85) asked why the Bedouins were described in contradictory terms—“avidity and avarice”; “generosity and prodigality”—the prose writer from Kufa Haytham ibn ‘Abd (d. 207/822), the author of several monographs on linguistics, ethnography, history, and genealogy of the Bedouin Arabs, responded by relating an unusual adventure that he had had in the desert. He asked a Bedouin woman for hospitality and was welcomed. When her absent husband returned, he was worried because he had nothing to offer his guest to eat. But in order not to break the sacrosanct rule of hospitality, he killed his guest’s mount and prepared the meat for him to eat. The host then left, returning only the following day. The story does not report whether the writer slept well after having eaten his own camel, but he was relieved to see the Bedouin return in the morning with several camels. They were for him, and were intended to make up for what he had lost the night before.61 Bedouin mythology was saved! We are at a time when identification with the Bedouin ideal was so strong that one Basra scholar who had stayed in the desert for several years returned to the city so enamored of his hosts that he oiled his son’s skin and made him stay in the sun so that the boy would take on their skin color. The story ends badly, however, as the child died of sunstroke.62

60. Tawhídi, Kitáb al-Junub al-Mushá`ara, ed. Ahmad Amin and Ahmad Zayn, 2 vols. (Cairo: Matba‘at Lajmat al-Ta’lif, 1958), 172–73. This presentation of the men of the desert continues with a long dissertation in praise of the fine qualities of the Bedouins in which the romanticism of the great urban men of letters of the eighth century is quite evident.
The same linguist had another student who liked to be called "the Bedouin" or "the Black Man." He oiled himself to tan in the sun and increase his "resemblance to the Bedouins, so as to justify his nickname."63

Faithful to this enthusiasm for the Bedouins, the fine minds of the first half of the ninth century continued to admire everything that came from the desert. Jāhib (d. 355/868), who was to Arabic prose of the ninth century what Ibn al-Muqaffa' had been for the eighth century, was one of this admiring throng. In his Book of Animals he goes so far as to state that, where knowledge of the animal world was concerned, Muslims had learned nothing from the Greeks that the Bedouins did not already know. On a less serious note, there is an anecdote that shows him offering a Persian friend (who knew Arabic well and spoke it eloquently) to forge a genealogy for him attaching him to some Bedouin tribe, so as to enhance his oratorical and rhetorical talents.64

A Geography of Pure Language

Of course not all the tribes that inhabited the desert could boast of the same purity of language. According to whether they lived in self-sufficient isolation or in areas of mixed open land and settlement, their speech was reputed to be unchanged or corrupted by solemnisms. On the basis of that "archaeological" concept of language, the grammarian Ishāq ibn Ibārīm al-Farābī (d. 507/917)—not to be confused with his compatriot, the philosopher—drew up a linguistic geography of the pure and the impure. This is how it went:

Among all the Bedouin tribes, the ones whose speech has been collected, to which one refers when the Arabic language is in question, and whose idioms have been collected, there are the Qays, the Tamīm, and the Asad. Almost everything authoritative concerning the Arabic language comes from them. People rely on them for the ghurāb [rare words] and the ṭarīf and the ṭarīf [diacritics]. Next come the Ḥudhayl, some [segments] of the Kūna and the Ṭā'īyin. . . . The speech of other tribes has not been much gathered. All in all, no language has been taken from either the sedentary [populations] or the nomads who live in parts of the desert situated near the foreign nations. It is thus that the language of the Lakhmids and the Judhām has not been gathered because of their proximity to the inhabitants of Egypt and the Copts [sic]. Neither has the language of the Qudāb been taken, or the Ghassān, and the Ḥiyād, for the same reasons of proximity to the inhabitants of Syria, and for all the more reason, because most of them are Christians and read Hebrew. Similarly, neither had language been taken from the Tābill and the Yamān, who were neighbors of the Byzantines in Mesopotamia, or from the Bakr, who live near the Copts and the Persians, or from the 'Abd al-Qays and the Azd of Oman, who were mixed, in the Bahrain area, with Hindus and Persians, or from the inhabitants of Yemen because of their mixture with the Hindus and the Ethiopians, or from the Banū Hanīfa and the inhabitants of Yamāma, or the peoples of Ṭāqif and of Tā'if because of their mixing with the merchants of Yemen who lived among them, or from the cities of the Hejaz, for those who gathered language found that their inhabitants had already been mixed with other nations and their speech was already corrupt.65

Ishāq ibn Ibārīm al-Farābī sets up a hierarchy here among the dialects of the tribes who live in the central regions of the Arabian Peninsula, whom he considers to be paragons of the Arabic language, and the other Bedouin tribes. In reality, as time went by, one tribe or another, one region or another, was taken as the prime example of "purity of language" (fāṣidha) in the context of eloquence, hapax, or poetry. In poetry, for example, Abu 'Amr ibn al-ʿAlāʾ had other preferences. In his opinion, the poets who displayed the greatest clarity and limpidity were from a region in the mountain chain that lies at the western edge of the Arabian Plateau along the Red Sea between Mecca and the border of Yemen, the land of the Hudhayl, the Ṭaqqīf, and the Azd. Fārābī, on the other hand, put those tribes at the bottom of his hierarchy of linguistic excellence, reproaching them for their contacts with the populations of Yemen. It is true, however, that he was writing in the tenth century. Although their land was near the merchant center of Tā'if, three days from Mecca by foot, the Hudhayl, whom he scorns, had been considered in the two first centuries of Islam to have a dialect of great linguistic purity.66

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63. Ibid., 7662; Anbārī, Nuzhat, 349; Suyūṭī, Baghjiyat, 498.
64. Yaqūt, Irdāb (Muṣjam al-Uṣūb), 6:57. There was also word of a man so eloquent that he was nicknamed "the Bedouin". Chibli, Iṣbahān, 12:27.
65. Suyūṭī, Al-Maṣḥuḥ, 1211.
66. Hassān ibn Thābit (d. 656 or 672), the poet of the Prophet of Islam, held the Hudhayl to be possessed of the greatest purity of language of his day. Ibn Rustaṣ, Al-Uṣūda, 88. Before 790, Shāfiʿī (d. 824/818)—who had not yet decided to become a jurist— is reported to have lived among them for years. He gathered from their transmitters of poetry "narratives of the happy days of the Arabs" and genealogies. Despite his young age, he was considered a refined connoisseur of Hudhayl poetry. His talents as an expert are reported to have been recognized by the great Asmaʾ. He was said to know more than ten thousand lines of verse, "with their declinations [ṭāḥah], their rare words [ṭarīf], and their themes [masāları]." Suyūṭī, Al-Maṣḥuḥ, 1211 (text of Khurṣīd).
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The inhabitants of the merchant city of Thaqif, neighbors to the Hudhayl, were also considered to possess a language of high quality, as were their neighbors in Mecca, but Fārābī placed them on the side of linguistic impurity. That idea goes against the dogmatically founded truth that if the Qur'an, which represents an impeccable incarnation of the linguistic norm of the Arabs, was revealed to a member of the tribe of the Quraysh of Mecca, it was because it was, at least in part, revealed in the language of that tribe. Consequently, Qurayshite speech, which is a pure dialect, must in turn be considered as fully incarnating the linguistic norm of the Arabs. The philologists attempted to support this dogmatic syllogism with economic and religious explanations. According to Jāhiz (d. 255/868), the great merchant city of Arabia enjoyed a clear and pure language precisely because it was the major religious and economic center for the Arabs. He supposed it to have learned from the Bedouin tribes that frequented it their finest expressions, their most striking words, and their most perfect phraseology. Meccan speech was thus thought to incarnate the Arab language at its highest point, which was a rich synthesis of the contributions of all the finest dialects of Arabia.\(^{69}\)

al-Baghdadi). Until the end of his life, he was solicited by collators of Arabic poetry who traveled to Egypt to profit from his talents as a “transmitter.” Medieval linguists claim that he said: “To learn about language from the Bedouins is like learning about the prophetic Tradition from the jurists.” Azhari, Tadbir al-Lughah, 1:4.

67. The Qur’an speaks of itself as “a Revelation . . . in the perspicuous Arabic tongue” (26:192, 193). The idea that the Qur’an was revealed in Arabic returns in fifteen other passages. Experts in dogmatics made the inimitability of the Qur’an a liturgical proof of its divine revelation.

68. Ibn Khaldūn echoes this vulgur when he writes: “The linguistic” habitat of the Mudar became corrupt when they came into contact with non-Arabs. . . . The dialect of the Quraysh was the most correct and purest Arabic dialect, because the Quraysh were on all sides far removed from the lands of the non-Arabs. Next came (the tribes) around the Quraysh, the Thaqif, the Hudhayl, the Khuzā‘a‘, the Banu Kinānah, the Ghanīm, the Banū Arīd, and the Banū Tamīm. The Raba‘ah, the Lakhm, the Judhām, the Ghassān, the Yūd, the Qudā‘a, and the Arabs of the Yemen lived farther away from the Quraysh, and were (variously) neighbors of the Persians, the Byzantines, and the Abyssinians. Because they had had contact with non-Arabs, their linguistic habitat was not perfect. The Arabic dialects were used by Arab philologists as arguments for (linguistic) soundness or corruption according to the (degree of) remoteness of the tribes speaking them from the Quraysh.” Ibn Khaldūn, Muqaddimah, trans. Vincent Monteille as Discours sur l’histoire universelle, 3 vols. (Beirut, 1967–68), 2nd ed., vol. 3. (Paris: Sindbad, 1978), 312–66, quoted, slightly edited, from the English translation by Franz Rosenbach, The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History, 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 3:343–44. For a critical bibliography of this theory, see Blachère, Histoire de la littérature arabe, 1:78.


Another thesis that circulated in the eighth century inscribes the Qur’anic revelation more broadly within the linguistic families of the Hejaz. According to a narration transmitted by the linguisst and genealogist Abū ‘Ubaydaya (d. 210/825?), the Qur’an was revealed in seven tongues, five of which came from the region of Arabia stretching along the Red Sea between the Hejaz and Yemen that is known as Hawazān.\(^{70}\) This is the land of the Sa’d and the Jashm, two tribal segments of the Bakr, the Nasr, and the Thaqif. Abū ‘Ubaydaya was of the opinion that the purest and clearest speech was that of the Banū Sa’d, because of a tradition that quotes the Prophet as saying, “I am the most eloquent of the Arabs because I am from Quraysh and I have been raised among the Banū Sa’d.” Indeed, it has been attested that the infant Muhammad had a Sa’dite wet nurse. Abū ‘Ubaydaya shares with his master Abū ‘Amr ibn ‘Alī the opinion that the most eloquent Arabs were those who lived on the Hawazān plateau, on the shores of the Red Sea between the Syrian Desert and Yemen.\(^{71}\)

The Arab genealogists attached the dialects of these tribes to one linguistic family, that of the Mudar. It was from them that the Qur’an borrowed its language, which explains the overabundance of excellence with which the linguists credited them. According to Abū ‘Ubaydaya, the Book of God also drew on the speech of Yemen, which perhaps explains the trips that certain linguists took to the land of the queen of Sheba. Our Fārābī, too, went to Yemen. It was when he was settled in the locality of Zubīd that he composed his Dictionary of the Arabic Language.\(^{72}\)

Among the tribes that Fārābī considered to possess great eloquence there were the Tamīm. In their case, his appreciation of their language is inscribed in a continuity that goes back to the origins of the Basra school. The master who founded that school, ‘Amru ibn ‘Alī, had stayed among the Tamīm to collect their speech. On one occasion he is even depicted, surrounded by his main students in his study circle, explaining to two of

\(^{69}\) and also thanks to the pilgrimages to religious centers such as Mecca, it derived its abundant vocabulary from a great number of dialects": Encyclopédie de l'Islam, 1:458.

70. Sayyūtī, Baghîyat, 2:394; 113. Although a great connoisseur of genealogies and of the deeds of the Arabs, Abū ‘Ubaydaya is considered less competent regarding languages than his fellow student Amr ibn ‘Abī Jahl, ibid., 2113.

71. Abū ‘Ubaydaya spent a long time among the Hawazān. On one occasion he tells Abū Hātim al-Sūrī: “More than one among those who have knowledge among the Hawazān whose father or grandfather knew the age of the Jahlīyya [the pre-Islamic period] have informed me that . . . “ Sayyūtī, Al-Ma‘ādir, 2:316. The confederation of the Hawazān included the tribes of the ‘Amir ibn Sa‘ā’a and the Thaqif, with whom Abū ‘Ubaydaya was bound by a pact of fraternity. The Hawazām “rear guard” included the Jashm ibn Mu‘āwiyah ibn Bakr, the Nasr ibn Mu‘āwiyah ibn Bakr, and the Sa’d ibn Bakr.

his colleagues the linguistic differences between the speech of the tribes of the Hejaz and the Tamim. The master much admired the latter's eloquence, as they had given the Arabs some of their greatest pre-Islamic and Islamic poets, including the eternal rivals, Jarir and Farazdaq. The Basra master, who was not fond of modern poetry, made an exception only for Jarir, precisely because he almost never left his native desert.

At the advent of Islam, the Tamim, a fairly large confederation of tribes, occupied a vast territory that included the better part of eastern Arabia, almost all of the Najd, a part of Yamama, and part of Bahrain. They moved in transhumance toward the northeast, where the Asad—another tribe reputed for its eloquence—were their neighbors, up to the banks of the Euphrates. The Zayd and the 'Amr were the two principal segments of the Tamim, and they may have provided the grammarians with the two personages of their casuistic exchanges. At the beginning of the tenth century—Faraabi's era—linguists still considered the Tamim the repository of a great linguistic authenticity, and that reputation stood firm at the end of the century. At that time Jawhari (d. 398/1007), the author of an important lexico-grammatical dictionary, lived for a while among the people of the Najd. It is interesting to see that his method for working is the same as that of his eighth-century predecessors: 'I asked a member of the Banu Tamim of the Najd who was drawing water from a well,' he recounts, 'putting my finger on the nakkis [a pulley, here with an enlarged hole with a wedge to stabilize the rope] what sort of instrument it was. In reality, I wanted to check whether it was pronounced nakkis or nabis. He answered me: 'Nabiss.' I added, 'Doesn't the poet say [and here he cites the verse] nabiss?' He responded, 'I have never heard that from our ancestors.' What is interesting about this anecdote is that it dramatizes a question to which I will have occasion to return, which is the superiority of direct evidence over bookish knowledge. In writing, the two terms are differentiated only by a diacritic point that even the most careful copyist or scribe might omit.

What can we say about this geography of language? That in its consideration of Arabic eloquence it mingles dogmatic and historical considerations. When the second caliph of Islam, 'Umar (d. 23/644) says, "Only the young of Quraysh and of Thaqif should read from our copies of the Qur'an," and when the third caliph, 'Uthman (d. 35/656) adds, "Take dictation from the Qur'an from the Hudhayl and take a scribe from among the Thaqif," the two men are referring both to a dogmatic principle and to a historical one: the speech of those two tribes was closer than all others to the language in which God revealed the Qur'an to Muhammad. But when Faraabi declares that the linguists of his epoch hesitate to approve of the speech of the people of Thaqif and Tili' because of their mixing with the merchants of Yemen who live among them, he is making use of an explanatory principle of a sociohistorical type that makes the mingling of the inhabitants of those two commercial centers with foreign populations the source of the corruption of their speech. As early as the mid-eighth century, it was thought that there was nothing more to be learned from the speech of Medina, "the city of the Prophet." Asma'i, a great connoisseur of language, asserted: "I have stayed for some time in Medina: during my entire stay there, I found not a single piece of valid poetry. I encountered only faulty or forged pieces." Be that as it may, Medina in the pre-Islamic jabiyya never had great poets capable of exalting its talents for eloquence. Nor did Mecca have a great poet before 'Umar ibn Abi Rab'it (d. 93/711)—hence, before the coming of Islam. How could its inhabitants, the Quraysh, be considered the possessors of a pure and correct language? "What proof do we have of the prestige that was attached, in the peninsula, to the Qurayshite dialect before the coming of Islam?" None.

A Theory of the Stay in the Desert

The beginning of the tenth century marked the resurgence of a neo-Bedouinism that reestablished a connection with the past of the Basra school by putting a stay in the desert on the agenda for scientific reasons. This notion was backed by the leading philologists—'Abd al-Malik (d. 321/933), Azhari (d. 370/980), Ibn al-Jinni (d. 372/982), and Jawhari (d. 398/1007)—who, in imitation of their prestigious elders of the eighth century, flocked to the desert. At the same time that these scholars made sojourns in the desert, they collated dictionaries of the Arabic language counted among the most important that the Muslim world had known since Khalil ibn Ahmad (d. 175/791). It was the latter to whom they all referred, to the point that their own methodology seems simply an a posteriori systematization of the experience of the "great transmitters" of the eighth century. In the brief note of introduction to his Dictionary, Jawhari restates this methodological position, reminding his reader that his three-point approach was
point of learning a considerable number of terms and narratives. Most of these figures prominently in my dictionary. 80

Azhari does not relate his extraordinary adventure in the desert with the simple aim of presenting an anecdote. Quite the contrary, he uses it as the thread that attaches his approach to the prestigious transmitters of Basra in the eighth century. In the method that he recommends, investigation in the desert in contact with Bedouins "of the clearest and most correct speech" is placed first among his three practical sources; he states that "all that the great scholars have been able to write in their books cannot replace direct evidence [mushabada] or substitute for an acquired experience and familiarity." The acquisition of linguistic information by oral transmission from masters in the discipline came only second, after which came reading and meditation on the masterworks, "such as the Kitāb al-'Ayn attributed to Khalil ibn Ahmad, then the books written in our own times."

Among the works of his contemporaries that Azhari disparages, there is a "Complement" (Takmil) to the Kitāb al-'Ayn composed by Bushti (d. 348/959), a philologist from the region of Bukhara. Azhari speaks of him at length. The book seems to him to present all the faults he is campaigning against. Bushti relies on works that he has read without having received transmission of their contents through known and recognized masters. The author has no "audition" (samā') with a qualified master. In order to justify or minimize this lack, he has thought it appropriate to base what he says on famous predecessors that, in his eyes, authorize license. He cites Abū Turāb and Qutaybi as two illustrious predecessors who did as much. Azhari concedes that the two men have no "audition" for all of the books that they cite, but he adds immediately that they had masters "worthy of trust" (thiqā) from whom they learned their trade. Abū Turāb, for example, frequented "for years" Abū Sa'id the Blind and "listened to a number of books of his." After that he traveled to Herat, in Afghanistan, where he listened to Shamr ibn Hamdawayh, who, in his youth, had attended the seminar of Ibn al-A'rābi (d. 351/964) in Kufa and studied "some of his books" with him, "without counting all that he had learned from the Bedouins of clear and correct speech and retained from their mouths." Azhari comments:

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If Abū Turāb cites men whom he has not seen or heard, one can tolerate it and say to oneself that after all he must have memorized what he had read in books, backed up by a sure “audition.” In this case, the statements of those whom he has not seen come only to reinforce those that he has heard from others, somewhat like the traditionist scholars who, when a prophetic tradition in a particular chapter seems to them authentic because it has been transmitted to them by relaters worthy of trust who have received it from other, equally trustworthy relators, they follow it and use it as a support, then add to it narratives that they have collected by the authorization of transmission (ijāza).

Here Azhari assimilates the philologists’ work of collection to that of the traditionists. It is indeed true that both were faced with the same problems when it was a question of collecting and critiquing the materials that they had gathered (narratives, poems, and so forth). This was something that Asma’ī (d. 213/828) and the great scholars of his epoch already knew, particularly since some of them were also traditionists. One narrative of which Asma’ī is the protagonist illustrates this principle. Raba’ī (d. 329/940) states that he received it from his master, Mubarrad (d. 280/893), who had heard it from a disciple of the Basra scholar. This student relates that he was with his master when a group of men of letters from Khorasan arrived at his doorstep. One of them, thinking to flatter the philologist, told him that he was held in high esteem in his far-off homeland. Proudly puffing out his chest, Asma’ī responded: “What excuse would I have if my knowledge [ilm] were not worthy! Setting aside the ulamas, the jurists, and the traditionists, and counting only the poets of pure language whom I have known, there is So-and-So, So-and-So [and so on for a list of some forty names]. From them have I heard and from them have I memorized. They possessed only what is authentic. How could my ilm not be worthy? Do you know anyone who has gathered together as many sources of transmission [rīwāya]?”

The philologist ‘Askari, grasping the theoretical implications of this narration, notes at the beginning of the tenth century: “Asma’ī makes much here of the number of his transmissions [rīwāya] concerning the science of poetry and language” because he believed that “the ilm is valid by the auricular path and by reception from the mouth of men.” Asma’ī is in fact credited with having proclaimed the primary rule of linguistic investigation, given in the form of an injunction: “It is just to transmit linguistic knowledge [ilm] in the name of the one who delivers it.”

The transmitter taken by the collector of linguistic materials as an authority was considered to be something like a witness. By that same token, he must be credible, but in order for it to be credible, he must be ṣīqa, or “worthy of trust.” The idea of bona fides was an invention of the jurists that the traditionists took over. It was already familiar to the linguists of the generation of Sibawayh (d. 180/796), and it was the basis for the rule laid down by Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1002) that “language is taken by ‘audition’ [asma’] of ṣīqa transmitters.” Clearly, these are criteria that belong to the traditionist methodology. An example of their application is furnished by Abū al-Faraj of Isfahan (d. 356/967) in his Book of Songs, a vast anthology that the Middle Ages considered the “archive of the Arabs.” The material presented is surrounded with all the necessary guarantees, and systematically preceded by a “chain of guarantors.” With the same stubbornness as an experienced traditionist, Abū al-Faraj offers his reader all of the various paths by which that information has come to him, with the result that one piece of information may have two, three, or four different chains of transmission.

81. Raba’ī, Al-Muntaphī min Aḥbāb al-Asma’ī, b.1. It should be noted, in passing, that the linguists, like the traditionists, use the term ilm in a metonymic manner to designate “their” discipline and not “science” in general. When they have a strategic interest in presenting their knowledge as ilm, the representatives of the other disciplines do the same.
82. An: Yaqūt, Ibrāhīm, Mu’jam al-Tabarzād, 3:4. Thanks to the irony of fate, the important anthology of Bedouin poetry composed by Asma’ī, although he was considered one of the greatest transmitters of his time, met with only relative success, due to the small quantity of “rare words” that it contained and to the contractions he introduced into the chains of transmission of the poetic pieces given in it: Ghifrī, Isbādh, 2:303.
83. Ibn Khaldūn writes: “There exists no book comparable to it, as far as we know”: Ibn
Just as this method led its initiators to disappointments, it entangled the linguists in inextricable problems from which their discipline never recovered. "The erudite man of the ninth century," Régis Blachère rightly observes, "is backed into a desperate solution: a certain poem or narrative is receivable because a certain authoritative scholar or group of scholars held it to be authentic. Other [works], to the contrary, are dubious or un-receivable because those same authorities thought them suspect. A critique of the 'transmitters' is thus imperative for the erudite scholars, just as it was for the traditionalists who serve them as a model."

In order to justify his direct access to lexicographical reference works, and in the absence of a master, the author disputed by Azhari invokes the authority of the great masters of the early ninth century. Azhari seems to contest the legitimacy of this manner of access to knowledge, although elsewhere he seems to concede to it the prestige of the elders mentioned by the man under accusation. That type of access to knowledge is called 

\[\text{wijāda},\]

a technical term, formed on the root \(w.j.d\), that can be rendered by "discovery" or "invention," in the juridical sense of the word, as William Marçais suggests. It speaks to the fact of acceding to a work without having had "audition" of it from a recognized master. Does Azhari contest the 

\[\text{wijāda},\]

What he says is contradictory: in one instance he rejects it, in another he recognizes it. It has in its favor the precedent of reputed linguistic scholars, however. In his book on Arab "Glorious Days," Abu `Ubaydah (d. 210/823), for example, says: "I have found in a writing in the possession of one of the sons of (my master) ..." In reality, Azhari only objects to his adversary's 

\[\text{wijāda},\]

because the man had not traveled to encounter "true" Bedouins and great masters. Hence, he places direct "audition" at the summit of the hierarchy of modes for the transmission of knowledge. All the great linguists concurred. In the classification established by one of them, "discovery" is the last of six listed modes for the acquisition of language, with "license" in fourth place.

From Azhari's viewpoint, Abu Turab—his adversary's most prominent authority—made a "voyage" that permitted him to frequent masters worthy of trust; he is thus irreproachable even when he uses books without having had a direct reading of their authors or qualified transmitters. But if one has had no direct "audition" of known and recognized masters, how can all knowledge be founded on what is nothing but a liberty taken? Azhari reproaches his adversary for doing just that.

Curiously, he addresses no criticism to "license" (\(\text{ijāza}\)). Admitting this mode of transmission is not something to be taken for granted. Many scholars rejected it because of the threat it represented to the voyage as a principle of knowledge. It was against their elders that reputed linguists such as Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933), Ibn al-Anbāri (d. 327/939), and Azhari (d. 370/980)—in imitation of great names in the religious sciences of the ninth century—defended its legitimacy. It is interesting to note that one of the defenders of this method validates it by an appeal to a prophetic precedent: "The Prophet wrote letters to kings transmitted orally by his emissaries. That oral transmission took its (proper) rank instead of and in place of his word and his discourse. Similarly he consigned in writing in a scripta (\(\text{sahīfa}\)) regulations concerning taxes and the price of blood. Subsequently, people transmitted the content of this by taking authority from him. This could only be done by way of the 'delivery' (\(\text{manāwila}\)) of that writ or by 'license' (\(\text{ijāza}\)). All of this supports the validity of the \(\text{ijāza}\)."

Once again, we are invited to note the degree to which the secular sciences—in particular, those that had language as their object—continued to rely, in their debates, on the knowledge elaborated by the traditionists and their allies in the late eighth century. But if the doctrine of audition was bent by those who associated with it new modes for acquiring knowledge, no one contested the excellence of contact with a master, and hence travel.

Azhari reasserts his methodological positions when he turns to Qutaybi, whom his adversary had used as a refuge and justification. As a proof of the fame and reputation of this master, Azhari repeats his prestigious intellectual genealogy, one that attaches him to the Basra school through some of its most renowned members. How, Azhari exclaims indignantly, can anyone legitimately compare himself to such a man if he "knows only his village"? Who can say if the copies of the works at hand are not faulty? Or the meaning given to their content is not faulty as well? Like a pitiless prosecuting attorney, Azhari picks out disqualifying examples from his adversary's book to show his incompetence.

89. Blachère, Histoire de la littérature arabe, 1:114.
91. Suyūṭī, Al-Mażāhir, 1:87-103. The others are "and: the reading of the disciple before the master; 3rd: hearing the reading of a third party before the master; and 5th: correspondence."
92. Ibid., 1:98. The author cited is Anbāri.
Chapter Two

Among other things, he seizes on the term 'unnna, which the author of the first dictionary of Arabic philology, the Kitāb al-'Ayn, renders—citing a verse taken from A’shā (d. 82/701)—as badira, “a living hedge made of branches,” but which the Complement explains as “cords hung up on which meat is put to dry.” This allows him to administer the proof of his adversary’s ineptitude:

What Khalīl ibn Ahmad says is correct, if indeed it should be he who said it [thus implying that there is doubt of his authorship of the Kitāb al-'Ayn, attributed to him]. I have seen badira made of arfaj, a sort of spiny tree that grows on the plains, and of rimth, a type of tree of the tamaris family, placed as shoulder-high walls. Camels are enclosed within these to protect them from the cold from the north. I have seen the Bedouins call them unnna and place them as windbreaks. When they are dry, the Bedouins slaughter some camels, cut them up, and stretch our their quarters of meat on them to dry. I really do not see where the author of the Complement got the meaning that he gives to it. Perhaps he saw the needly on the pilgrimage to Mecca hang the meat of sacrificed animals to dry on cords and it came to his mind to explain A’shā’s verse in this manner. If he had seen the Bedouins in their desert, he would have known that the unnna is a windbreak [badira] made of branches.

Not only has the incriminated linguist no “audition” by a recognized master; he has not traveled in the desert to see with his own eyes the object he refers to. Because he had seen something else that bore the same name, he was led into error. The man seems to Azhari a dubious lexicographer on the levels of both hearing and autopsia. How can one be a linguist when one has not heard from authorized mouths the knowledge one is presenting, and when one has not seen what one is talking about? In both cases, the accused has failed to make the voyage a principle of knowledge. He has been satisfied with a “nonauthorized” reading of books.

Leaving aside the major question of autopsia with the promise to return to it later, let us follow Azhari’s indictment. In light of all the faults that Azhari attributes to him, the accused appears to be the very personification of the weaknesses of the method that Azhari denounces, in his introduction, as detrimental to the linguist’s true work, which is, above all, investigation. The man has not traveled, has not met illustrious masters, and has not lived in the desert. How could he legitimately claim to write a treatise on language? When the linguist arrived in Baghdad from Nishapur, he was in fact asked whether he had sojourned in the desert. He thought he could satisfy his interlocutors by saying that he had lived among the Bedouin Arabs who lived between Busht—his homeland—and Tūs. This was exactly the reproach that had been leveled at Layth ibn Nasr. When his master Khalīl ibn Ahmad dictated the Kitāb al-'Ayn to him, he asked him to complete it by continuing the inquiry that he himself had undertaken among the Bedouins. This he did. But instead of going to inquire in the “desert of the Arabs,” he went among the sedentary Bedouins of his own native land, Khurasan, whose speech was not as pure as that of their compatriots who lived in the original desert, because “they had mixed with non-Arabs.” Thus, his detractors claimed, he made many mistakes.

Azhari was the last of the great linguists of the tenth century to have studied in the school of the desert. When he and Jawhari theorized about a sojourn among the Bedouins as a basic act in linguistic inquiry, they were in fact systematizing a phenomenon that was no longer a novelty. To be sure, the linguists of the tenth century gave it a new impetus, but after them it functioned in the memory of the discipline only as an act firmly attached to a prestigious past. The sojourn in the desert lost consistency, fallen victim to presuppositions underlying much of the linguist’s work. As time went by, the desert no longer seemed the conservatory of the Arabic language, nor were the Bedouins seen as its depository. As with the anthropology of Bronislaw Malinowski and his dream of exotic societies living in archaism far from a devastating contact with “civilization,” the sojourn in the desert metamorphosed into a lazy and nostalgic gesture that was no longer possible because of the Bedouins themselves. Corrupted by mixing with peasants, city dwellers, and non-Arabs, the inhabitants of the desert eventually brought on the irretrievable loss of their linguistic paradise. In that case, what was the point of traveling to collect a language that had lost its authenticity? 96

93. On Khalīl ibn Ahmad, a great Iraqi philologist of the eighth century, see Mahdi Makhzūmī, Al-Khalīl ibn Ahmad al-Farabī: A’īd al-lhwu wa Manhajahu (Baghdad: Wizarat al-Ma‘arif, 1960).

95. Qīfī, Fuhū, 3:42.
96. This is precisely what Ibn Khaldūn was objecting to in the fourteenth century when he wrote: “No attention should be paid to the nonsensical talk of certain professional grammarians who are not capable of understanding the situation correctly and who think that eloquence no longer exists and that the Arabic language is corrupt. They draw this conclusion from the
In the centuries that followed, there was always a philologist or a lexicographer who would go stay in the desert, as in the good old days. These trips seem to have lasted until the twelfth century. The grammarian Abū al-Karam of Baghdad (d. 500/1106) — who spoke Arabic — and the philologist and Qur’an exegete Zamakhshari (d. 538/1143) — a Persian-speaking native of Iran — are perhaps the two last representatives of this linguistic current. The first of these men traveled to the Hejaz and to Yemen and “inquired among the Bedouins whose language be supposed to be pure and clear,” his biographer notes with evident scepticism. The second chose to leave his native Khwārizm to go live in the Hejaz, where he stayed long enough to have “the wind of the desert and the perfume of the watering places of the authentic Bedouin Arabs blow on his language.”

In the twelfth century, was there any need to go into the desert to fabricate the “clear and pure” (fi‘l ba‘d) Arabic language? Certainly not. Locked up in books, the fi‘l ba‘d had for some time been functioning as a closed system. There was no longer any need to travel to forge it, and even less need to acquire it. The treatises that contained it circulated from one end of Islam to the other. It no longer had its former power of attraction, though. Once the language of empire, it was now no more than a provincial language that had to come to terms with other languages, Persian and Turkish in particular. Nor was its cultural prestige the same: after the tenth century, great monuments of literature had been written in Persian. Politically defeated and culturally diminished, Arabic nonetheless continues to conserve its status of a dogmatic idiom or, to put it differently, its status as the language of Islam. With what qualifications? Both as the language of Revelation and as the nearly exclusive linguistic framework of elaboration for the basic books of all the elements that make up Islam. The various religious tendencies, medieval and modern, have continued to live, doctrinally, on that inheritance.

At the origin of this hermeneutic situation there lies the connection between ethnolinguistic inquiries that take the desert as their field of investigation and the vast and dual movement of the collection of traditions (hadith), on the one hand, and the gathering of materials related to the biography of the Prophet and to Islam (sira), on the other. Like panels of a triptych, these three dogmatic endeavors were created with the unified aim of consolidating the canonical community of Muslims, thanks to “delivering the meaning of the scriptures and their application.”


99. Mohammed Arkoun, La pensée arabe (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), 29. Nothing indicates this dogmatic nature of the fi‘l ba‘d language better than the rule developed by Kisa‘ī (d. 507/1112), which states that “the Sunna — Islamic Tradition — is the judge of the language, but the contrary is not true”. Ijīrī, Išāb ‘an al-Shāfī‘i, MS no. 3823, Assadiyya Library, Damascus, fol. 492a. It would be a mistake, in such conditions, to think that the Lisan al-‘Arab (the great dictionary of the Arabic language worked out in the late thirteenth century) is a simple lexicographical tool. Its author, Ibn Manṣūr (d. 711/1311) says himself that what he was aiming at in its composition was “the conservation of the foundations of [the] prophetic language”. Lisan al-‘Arab, 1:8-9. By giving primacy to the Qur’an and to prophetic Tradition in the conception of its entries, he intended to establish an explicit connection with the “Sources of the Law” as they