

A brief autobiographical note

For over 35 years I have worked on the history, languages, and writing-systems of the various populations of Syria and Arabia from about 1000 BC until the early Islamic period (seventh/eighth centuries AD). I came to this field through the study of ancient West Semitic languages and then specialized in the languages and scripts of ancient North Arabia (Safaitic, Hismaic, Taymanitic, Dadanitic [formerly called “Lihyanite”], Thamudic, and Hasaitic), and Old (i.e. pre-Islamic) Arabic.

After studying Arabic with Aramaic and Syriac at Oxford, with a special subject on the Ancient North Arabian inscriptions under Professor A.F.L. Beeston, I lived in Lebanon and then Jordan working with Gerald Lankester Harding. Through him I met and had long correspondence with Professor Fred V. Winnett of Toronto University. Thus, I was incredibly fortunate to be trained by the three greatest experts on these inscriptions of their time.

After Gerald Lankester Harding died in 1979, I joined the newly formed Yarmouk University at Irbid in Jordan as a Research Fellow with the rather over-ambitious task of setting up a programme called the *Corpus of the Inscriptions of Jordan Project* with the aim of recording all the inscriptions in Jordan! By the time I left Yarmouk and returned to the UK in 1984, I had led a number of expeditions to record inscriptions in the north-east of Jordan, had built up for the university both a sizable archive of photographs of inscriptions of all types from Jordan and, through the work of Geraldine King, a huge card index of every published reading of every Safaitic inscription. Thanks to the work of Ann Searight, the project also had information on all published rock drawings in Jordan and a great many which had remained unpublished.

After my return to the UK, I worked as an independent scholar and in 1993 was made a Research Associate of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford, and in 1994 I was given a Leverhulme Fellowship to work on the Safaitic inscriptions. In 1997 I was elected a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, and in 2010 I was made a Research Associate of the Khalili Research Centre at Oxford.

I continued to lead expeditions in Jordan and Syria to record Ancient North Arabian inscriptions and the numerous rock drawings which accompany them. One such project was the *Safaitic Epigraphic Survey*

Programme (1996–2003), the aim of which was to rediscover and record properly the thousands of Safaitic inscriptions copied in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of which no photographs existed. This was very successful and all but two of the sites were rediscovered. In the mid-1990s, I also led a rescue survey in the area of al-Namārah in southern Syria where large numbers of inscriptions were in danger of being destroyed in the course of building a dam. The inscriptions from these surveys have already been entered in the Safaitic Database, see below.

Since the vast majority of the Safaitic, Hismaic, and Thamudic inscriptions are graffiti written by ancient nomads, the study of these texts has led me to work on the history of the Near Eastern nomads in the pre-Islamic period and on the varied and often surprising uses of literacy, and the relationships of literate and non-literate communities in the ancient world.

I have also worked for many years on inscriptions in Nabataean Aramaic, and have almost completed a detailed study of how the Nabataean script evolved into the Arabic script. Alongside this, I am working on an analysis of what is known of the Arabic language in the pre-Islamic period. I have also worked on other forms of the Aramaic script and in April 2011, published a detailed study of the development of the Aramaic inscriptions on coins issued by a series of women rulers in eastern Arabia during the Hellenistic period.

I am the academic director of the *Ancient Arabia: Languages and Cultures* website at the Khalili Research Centre, Oxford. This was set up in 2010 to host previously unpublished material connected with ancient Arabia, including large numbers of pre-Islamic inscriptions. Already, the fundamental work on the Hismaic inscriptions by the late Geraldine King (her previously unpublished doctoral thesis) and a database of the names and vocabulary of the Hismaic inscriptions have been placed on this website, together with the report on the 800 inscriptions from Dhofar in an, as yet, undeciphered script which were recorded by Ali Ahmad al-Mahash al-Shahri and Geraldine King in the early 1990s. The site also makes available for the first time a transcription by Norman N. Lewis of the *Journal* kept by William John Bankes on his visit to Petra in 1818, only the second visit by a European to the site after its rediscovery by John Lewis Burkhart in 1812. This transcription is accompanied by photographs of the original document.

The Safaitic Database Online This is based at the Khalili Research Centre, Oxford and is the result of many years of work. I started it in the mid 1990s and now it contains almost 28,000 of the approximately

30,000 known Safaitic inscriptions. These are graffiti carved by nomads on the rocks of the desert in southern Syria, eastern Jordan, and northern Saudi Arabia between the first century BC and the fourth century AD. Many of them are remarkably informative and they are our only first-hand source for the history, way of life, and language of these nomads, who were not literate at any other period. They also inform us of their relations with each other and with the external powers (Rome, the Jewish and Nabataean states, etc.). They are mostly published in scattered books and articles in a number of different languages and are often difficult to access. The aim of the project has been to create an easily updatable corpus in the form of an online database which will contain transliterations, translations, commentaries, and as much ancillary information as possible as well as photographs for each text whenever these are available. The database is already online with a sample of 3420 inscriptions, and funds are being sought for the completion of the project.

The Online Database of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia [ODIANA]. This is an extension of the SDO to include all the other Ancient North Arabian inscriptions (Taymanitic, Dadanitic, “Thamudic”, Hismaic, and Hasaitic) and the handful of Old (i.e. pre-Islamic) Arabic inscriptions. It is being prepared in collaboration with the *Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions* based at the University of Pisa and the *Digital Archive for the Study of pre-Islamic Arabian Inscriptions* funded by the European Research Foundation. Together with them, it is hoped to provide a single portal through which all the inscriptions of ancient Arabia North and South Arabia can be searched.

The inscriptions of the oasis of Tayma (Saudi Arabia). I am currently working with the German Archaeological Institute in the Saudi-German Archaeological Mission to Tayma. In particular, I am studying the Nabataean and Taymanitic inscriptions found during the excavations and in other parts of the oasis and its environs. I am also producing a catalogue of all the inscriptions in the Tayma Museum.

Old Arabic within its linguistic environment. A study of what is known of the Arabic language before the Rise of Islam (mid seventh century AD), from texts which have survived independently of the early Arab grammarians (i.e. “epigraphic Old Arabic”). Our knowledge of the Arabic language dates mainly from the Islamic period since up to the sixth century AD it seems to have been an almost entirely spoken tongue. However, there is a small but growing number of pre-Islamic texts in the (epigraphic Old) Arabic language, transcribed in a variety of scripts normally used for other languages. The study deals not only with the linguistic features of Old Arabic, but with the development of the Arabic

script, its orthographic conventions, its alphabetic letter-orders, and the epigraphic Old Arabic "fossils" which can be found in the language of the Islamic period. It places these within the context of the other languages and scripts which were in use in Arabia and its neighbours in the first half millennium of the Christian era. An article on the subject has been contributed to volume 3 of the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2008: 464–477), and a book on Old Arabic within its linguistic environment is in preparation.