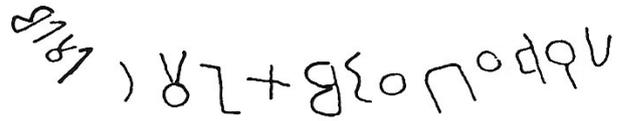




Sabaic script



Thamudic script

You may have already read the article about the Nabataean Script and that it is rather difficult to determine the exact roots and history of the many inscriptions carved on rock panels all over the Arabian Peninsula.

So this article tries to shed a bit of light onto this interesting subject and to give you a better understanding of the texts you might see, when traveling through the Saudi desert areas.

The Beginning

When and how did this all started? 5,000 years ago the first written language was created by the ancient Sumerians in southern

These were well fired in kilns to increase sturdiness for rough transport conditions.

The Sumerian cuneiform script was also imported and used by their neighbors in Akkad and adopted to their Semitic language. Both Sumeric and Akkadian language was used parallel in the greater Middle East area for a long time until they both were replaced by Aramaic in the 1st century BC. Sumerian was a stand alone language with no relationship to any other and started to be used in Uruk and Eridu around 3,000BC and died out 1,000 years later. It survived for another 1,000 years as a religious language.

and record a message, which was an important development for cross cultural trading.

It was an alphabet without vowels and had a long form with 31 letters and a short form with 22 and was written from left to right on clay tablets. This early script already had two genders, three nouns and adjectives (nominative, accusative, genitive) and three numerical descriptions (singular, dual, plural). The syntax was based on verb-subject-object.

It was so popular that other ancient languages where written even in Ugarit cuneiform script. The cuneiform script form was also used

ANCIENT ARABIAN SCRIPTS & LANGUAGES

A DIFFICULT RESEARCH SUBJECT

by Thomas Kummert www.ancient-cultures.info



Taymaic script



Mesopotamia. It began with a series of pictograms and symbols to record trade quantities on clay tokens attached in small cloth or leather bags to goods.

Quickly this developed into a cuneiform writing system based on logosyllabic, syllabic and later in Ugarit into the first alphabetic form.

The medium used were clay tablets, cylinders and even cones. Cuneiform script was recorded first in vertical columns and later horizontal. Even school tablets were found giving proof of the first early scribe education system around 5,000 years ago.

And there is another surprise, imagine that 4,500 years ago the first mail envelop was developed for confidential messages. Clay tablets were simply sealed into bigger clay envelopes.



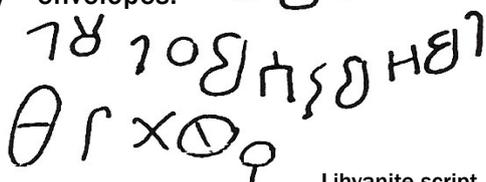
Nevertheless the Sumerian cuneiform script had a much longer lifespan as ancient people needed it for cross cultural trade. Cuneiform writing quickly spread with trade and was adopted for various languages such as Akkadian in North Mesopotamia, Elamite in Persia, Hittite or Luwian in Anatolia, Hurrian the language of Mitanni in northern Mesopotamia and southeast Anatolia, Old Persian and Ugarit a Mediterranean port city.

Ugarit Alphabet

What might surprise you is the discovery that the cultures in the Arabian Peninsula at first were using the same early cuneiform script developed 1,000 years earlier in Ugarit, today's Ras Shamra in Syria on the Mediterranean coast. This cuneiform writing was really based on an alphabet to express

at the time in all the Mesopotamian kingdoms. But even if they look similar they are unrelated and developed independently. It is not known yet why the early Arabian Peninsula cultures used the Ugarit cuneiform script, but the best guess is that existing long distance trade at the time was the reason. Recent research found that trade ties and volume flows were much more intense and higher, than what experts previously thought.

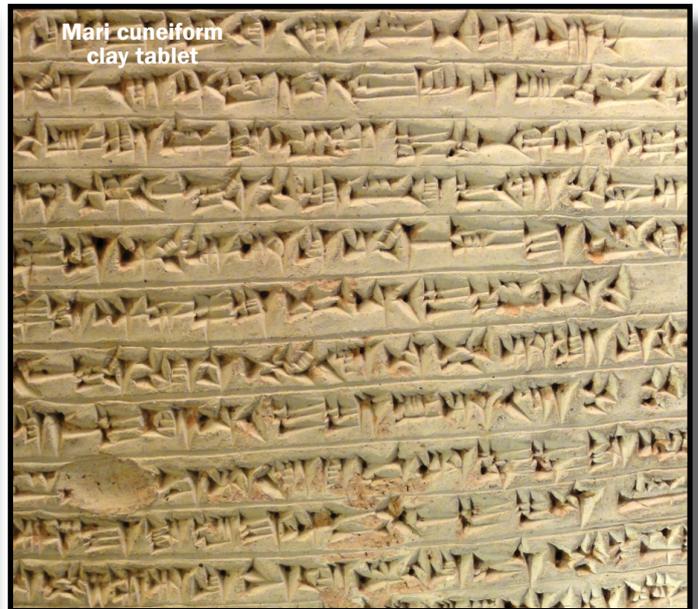
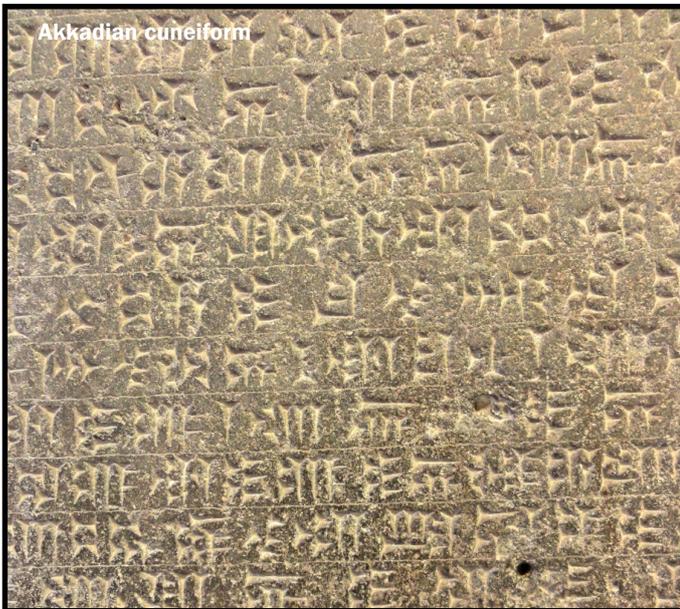
But quickly the different economic and religious centers developed different scripts and alphabets with the progress of their own distinct cultures and development of different religious cults worshipping to diverse deities. Over 13 different languages, named either after the cultures and tribes or the area of their usage, developed over time. All of these languages evolved from the Semitic language group.



Lihyanite script



Dedanite script



Phoenician Script

Shortly after Ugarit the well known Phoenician seafarers developed their first non cuneiform script in the region. There were very few inscriptions found, but one interesting example survived and was excavated in the palace of a small ancient city state called Sam'al or Ja'udi / Bit Gabbar today's Zincirli. This remarkable text dated 825BC gives you a fascinating insight into history and day to day live and therefore is recorded here:

"I am Kilam-muwa son of Hayyar. Gabbar was king of Ja'udi but he did nothing, then there was Bamach but he also did nothing. And my father Hayyar also did nothing. My brother Sa'ûl did also nothing. I Kilam-muwa son of Hayyar did something what those before me never did.

The house of my father was amongst powerful kings and each reached out to fight. But I was in the hands of the kings like fire, which was eating their beards and destroying their hands. And the king of Danunaea stood above me, but I rented [ancient term for political pact] against him the king of Assur. A young woman was offered on the market for a sheep, a man for a tunic.

I am Kilam-muwa son of Hayyar sat on the throne of my father. Under the previous kings the Mushkabim lived like dogs. But I was a father to the one and a mother to the other and to the third a brother. And who never had seen the face of a sheep I made the owner of a whole herd. And who never had seen the face of a cow I made the owner of a whole herd and as well owner of silver and owner of gold. And who had never seen linen before since his childhood was covered in my times

in byssos [special silk produced from certain sea mussel secrets].

And I took the Mushkabim strongly by the hand and they showed me their love like the love of a fatherless child to its mother. And whoever of my sons, who will reign in my place will change this inscription the Mushkabim shall not honor the Ba'ririm. And who destroys this inscription Baal Semed the god of Gabbar will destroy his head and Ba'al Hamman the god of BMH and Rakib-El the god of the dynasty will destroy his head."

Egyptian Hieroglyphs

It seems that far reaching trade started in this part of the world, with an explosion of various script developments. Some 5,500 years ago, hieroglyphs were developed and used mainly for religious



purposes in ancient Egypt, but they were non alphabetic pictograms and not a true script form. Only over 2,000 years later a cursive form of writing was developed in Egypt.

First Arabian Script

About 3,000 years ago the legendary Kingdom of Saba was

producing the highly thought after frankincense. This highly priced resin was transported to the end users in Egypt and Rome via the oasis kingdoms of Dedan, today's al 'Ula and "Tym" today's Tayma. These three cities were the first early trading and religious centers in the Arabian Peninsula before 750BC.

Ancient Arabian Languages

The key languages in the Arabian Peninsula were Dedanic spoken in the al'Ula region, Hagaric used in the kingdom of Gerrha with it's capital Thaj in the Eastern Province and the Old Arab language. This latter was different to the first two and did not have a script of its own and was used by Arab nomads. These languages were all specific to Saudi Arabia.

Qatabanic and Hadramitic languages were particular to the ancient Yemeni kingdoms and its understanding and use important for northern buyers of incense. In contrast Sabaic and Minaic were spoken in Yemen and southern Saudi Arabia for example at the important trading center al Faw, northwest of Najran. It is interesting that a few tribesmen today still use certain ancient languages in Yemen called Socotri, Mahrite and Hobyot. And the same in Oman with the Jibbali, Bathari and Harsûrî.

If we look north at the Levant area, Aramaic was the most important language base with two versions, Imperial Aramaic and Nabataean. They were possibly the most wide spread and used languages and scripts at the time. The most southern Nabataean inscription was discovered at al Faw. Two Bedouin languages were also used in the Levant being Safaitic

spoken in the al Safa hills area in Syria and Hismaic used in the Hisma desert area north of Tabuk and Wadi Ramm in Jordan.

When travelling in the northern part of Saudi Arabia, most texts you will see on rock faces are Thamudic inscriptions created by Thamud tribesmen. These inscriptions were divided into 5 groups based on variations.

Today we know that two groups are actually different languages such as Taymaic used by the people from the Tayma Kingdom 3,000 years ago. The other was found to be actually what we know today as Hismaic. The following list will give you a good “big picture” about the development of ancient languages and scripts in the Arabian Peninsula and Levant area, which we will refer to in more detail thereafter.

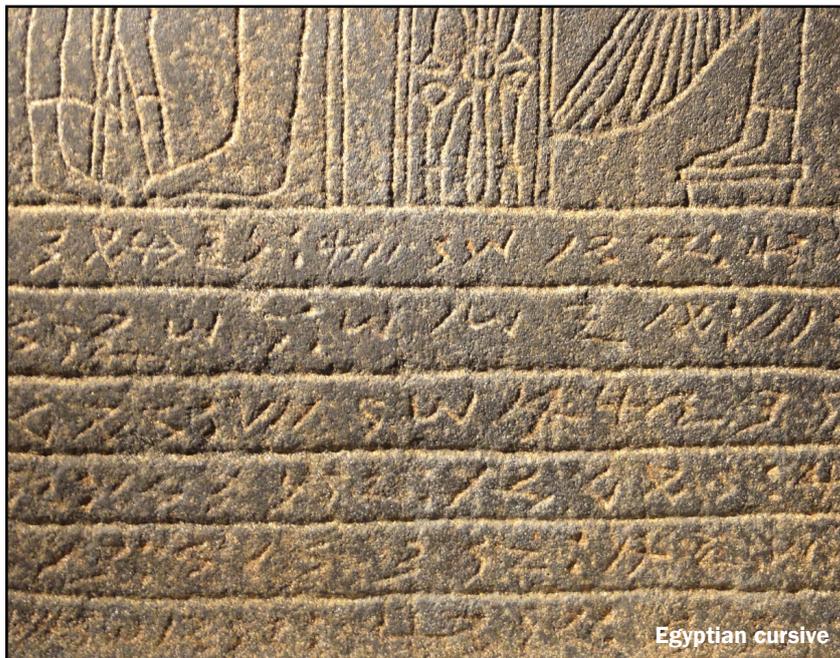
Dedanic & Hagaric

Dedanic was used from 1,000-100BC by the Dedanite and later Lihyanite people living in today's al'Ula in northern Saudi Arabia. It used only consonants in its script, 28 of them and no vowels at all. It existed alongside Sabaic, which used 29 consonants and which was the language spoken in the ancient Yemini Kingdom of Saba with its legendary Queen Sheba. The article changed from han to hal and an to al, which actually was the basis for our present day Arabic article. Dedanic did change over time, but Sabaic did not.

As both languages were used at the same time and both kingdoms had very close trading ties, it is not certain if Dedanic developed from Sabaic, or vice versa. Only one Dedanic alphabet primer found to date. Not surprising this had the same letter order than Sabaic. But again the letter order was similar to Ugaritic. But how is this possible when the Ugaritic script disappeared already 200 years before the certified use of Dedanic? One theory is the assumption that Taymaic might have been the intermediary language, as again it is close to Dedanic. We know very little about Hagaric, which was used in the ancient Gerra kingdom and along the western Gulf coast between 400-100BC. Specific to Hagaric is, that the han article was only used for peoples names.

Sabaic

Used in Yemen and across Arabian Peninsula to the Levant area between 800BC to 400AD, Sabaic was one of the most ancient and widest used scripts in the Arabian Peninsula. Sabaic was not a language, but a script using single letters or signs of meaning. It is also called South Arabian and rock inscriptions are found all over the Arabian Peninsula with slight variations. We are lucky today that Sabaic is the best studied and known script, because of the enormous amount of inscriptions discovered. Sabaic is related to Ancient Arabic with similar morphology and lexicon, but it differs in its phonetics from Arabic. Sabaic has three sibilants s, shl and 's, Arabic has only two s and shl. The 's also existed in other ancient Yemeni languages and scripts.



Egyptian cursive



Akkadian lion inscription



Phoenician detail

In addition Sabaic has six numeric symbols for 1,000, 100, 50, 10, 5 and a special division between numbers and words. There is also a different place and form of a definite article and vertical lines are used to separate words.

At first Sabaic was written in both directions, left to right and right to left, later right to left became the norm. When encountering Sabaic rock inscriptions on your desert trips please remember that long texts are written in the so-called "boustrophedon" serpentine style changing direction with every line. Then in 1970 a cursive variant was discovered as well.

It is interesting that private texts were written on wooden sticks with new created words for example for sesame seeds and lentils, an important change for traders who had to deal in these goods.

Sabaic influenced very much other cultures and their development of an own script - so other languages used similar composition and phraseology, plus showed parallels in their iconographic repertoire. The script was also used as decorative motif, adding geometric figures and patterns such as dentils, striation and empty rectangles. Emblematic animals were added such as oryx, ibex, bull, bucrane (bull head and horns), ostrich and hand, crescent, circle symbols.

Other ancient Yemini kingdom scripts used the same Sabaic alphabet such as Qatabanic, Hadramitic and Himyaric, with only few letters being developed into a distinctive local form. Very rarely long rock inscriptions are found. Therefore the first substantial text in the Arabian Peninsula with over 500 words recounting the victories of King Yatha'amar Watar son of Yakrubmalik are a treasure trove for archeologists. The use of the Sabaic script was later pushed back by Qatabanic, Minaic and Hadramitic. As history offers many changes, by 100BC Sabaic was adopted by the Himyar kingdom, which was then controlling Najd (al Ma'sal), Asir (Murayghan) and Najran. By 300AD Sabaic became the only language in Yemen.

Minaic

Minaic was used by five small kingdoms in Yemen along the Wadi Madhab in the Jawf region between 700-50BC. This included Nashshan, Kaminahu, Haram, Inabba' and Ma'in. Over 1,000 rock inscriptions dated from the 8th century to the 1st century BC were discovered. Minaic texts were also found at Najran, al Faw and even as north as in al'Ula.

From excavations in the old capital of the

ancient Dedan empire we know, that a large colony of Minaean traders lived peacefully in this oasis city. They were even allowed to worship their own gods and built a temple for them. This is interesting proof that trade was important and different tribes could live in harmony close together. Nevertheless Minaic was the first South Arabian script to disappear on rock surfaces on the Arabian Peninsula.

Aramaic

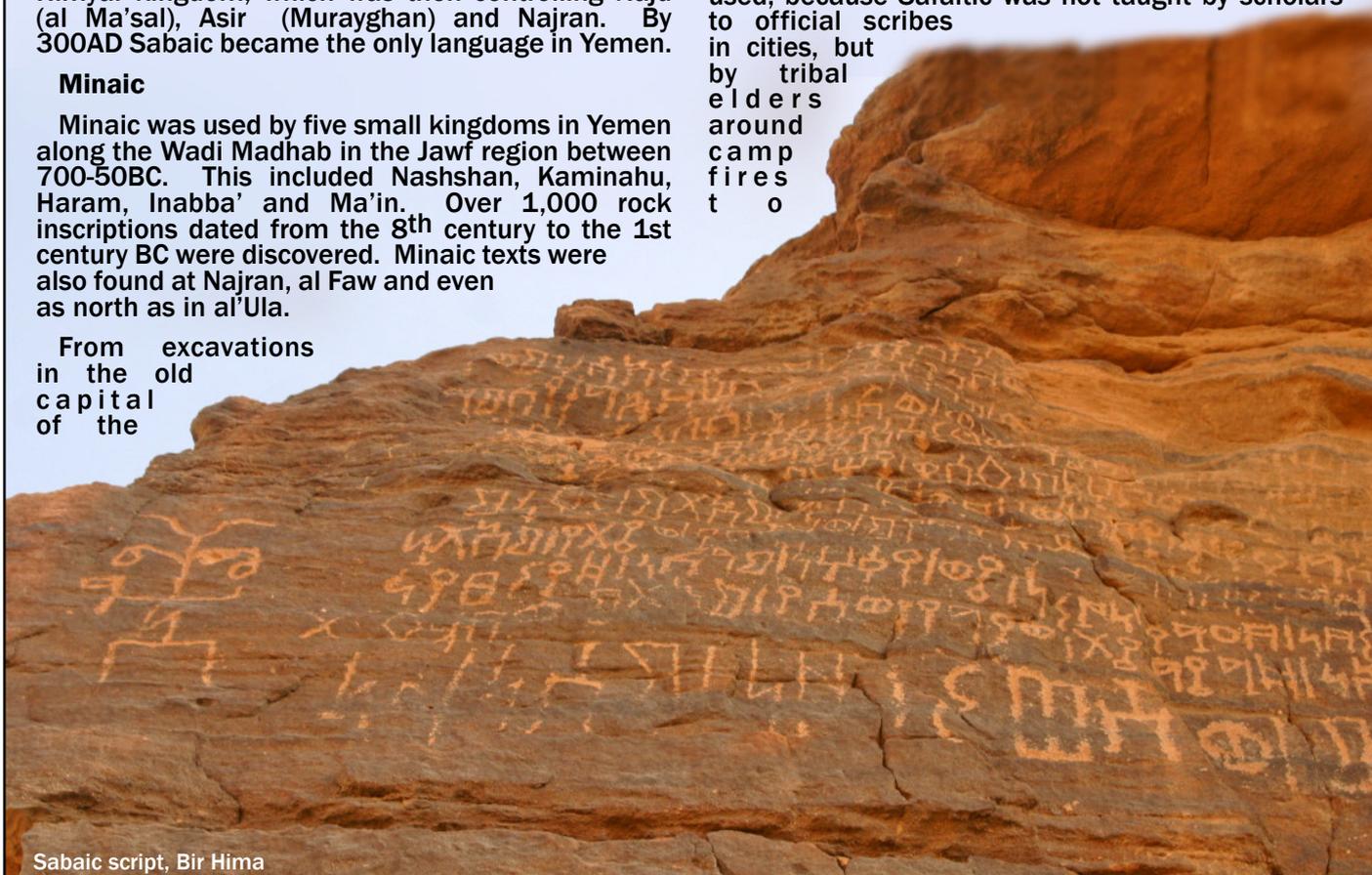
If we now move back further north into the Levant area, Aramaic was the dominant language and script for over 1,200 years between 800BC to 400AD. It was used in Syria, Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia and it replaced the usage of the Sabaic script in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula. In addition it delivered the basis of the modern Arabic alphabet together with its Nabataean sibling. Aramaic was also the language spoken by Jesus and still is in use today in a few southern Syrian villages.

Safaitic

Safaitic was used by desert nomads in Syria, Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia. Most inscriptions were found in the volcanic basalt region of northeastern Jordan. These record grazing activities of camels, goats and sheep. They include as well migrations and spring and winter camping areas. Some also express grief over the death of a clan member. Therefore they are found at grave sites with cairns.

Most of the deities referred to in inscriptions are known Nabataean gods, proof of close trading ties with this regional power. Safaitic herdsmen in their rock inscriptions were also requesting protection from enemies, as well as rich pickings, when on a desert bandit trip. But most important were inscriptions praying for good grazing. The text also ended frequently with a curse on anyone who defaces this text.

For this script different alphabet primers were used, because Safaitic was not taught by scholars to official scribes in cities, but by tribal elders around camp fires to



Sabaic script, Bir Hima

fellow tribesmen, who memorized sequence of the alphabet differently. In this vast area where the Safaitic script was used over 20,000 graffiti were recorded and give a good picture of the different regional styles. The over 2,000 inscriptions at the important Al-Isawi site are a good example.

Hismaic & Thamudic

Hismaic was previously classified as Thamudic and experts called it the E-style Thamudic, some even referred to it as Tabukite. This is a close shot as Hismaic was spoken in the Hisma desert north of Tabuk up to and including the Wadi Ramm area. Again the old Hismaic is closely related to Dedanic, its neighbor further south with which Hisma tribesmen traded camels and other goods. We can also assume that Hisma people worked closely with Nabataeans their close neighbors to the north. Details of the Nabataean script and language are not recorded here, as they were dealt with in a previous Sandladder article.

The name Thamudic comes from nomadic tribe roaming in the Tabuk region. We can assume that various tribal clans developed over time different ways writing, or better said rock carving their graffiti. Experts define these as Thamudic B, C or D. The A-style was reclassified later as separate a script as Taymaic and E-style as Hismaic. Again Thamudic is related to Dedanic.

Taymaic 800-500BC

Taymaic is a very interesting case and achieved its widest spread around 600BC. Tayma has a very colorful history from early beginnings 6,000 years ago. It was first mentioned in a text of the first Akkadian King Sargon I who ruled 2,335-2,279BC, recording his clan migration from the eastern Arabian Peninsula to

Mesopotamia. And again later it was referred to in a text of the fourth Akkadian King Naram Sin, a grandson of Sargon I.

Around 4,000 years ago the ruler of Tayma saw the necessity to build a huge city wall, which demonstrates the presence of an administrative structures and important public institutions. So we have evidence of a substantial pre-1st millennium BC settlement and well developed culture with own language and script in Tayma. Taymaic was also related to Dedanic which is situated only some 200km to the southwest.

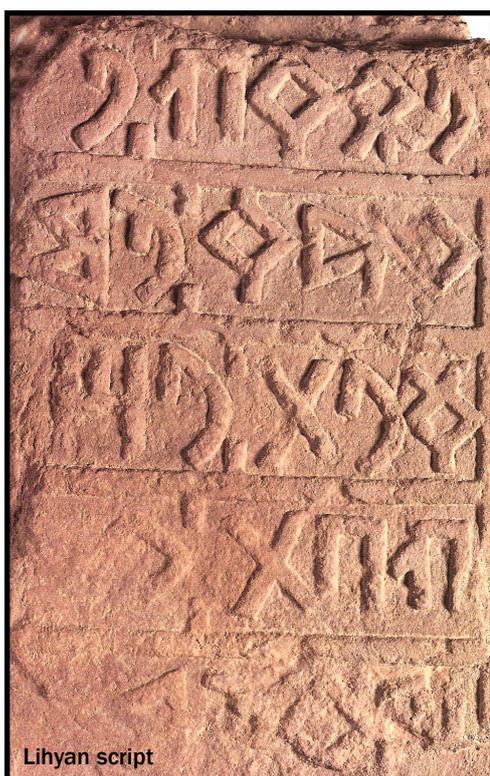
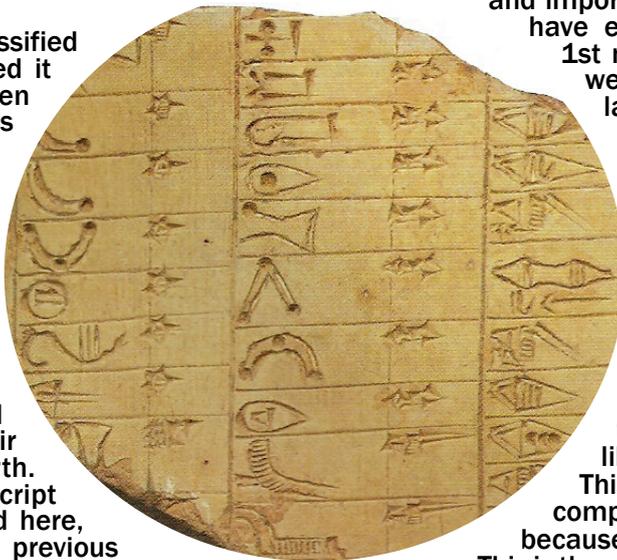
Regional Scripts

In southern Oman we have a cluster of four related tongues, the Hadara group and Shari is the oldest of the four. The local Shihra tribe speaks a very unique bird like chirping singsong language. This language has 8 more letters compared to the Arabic alphabet, because of the added bird like sounds.

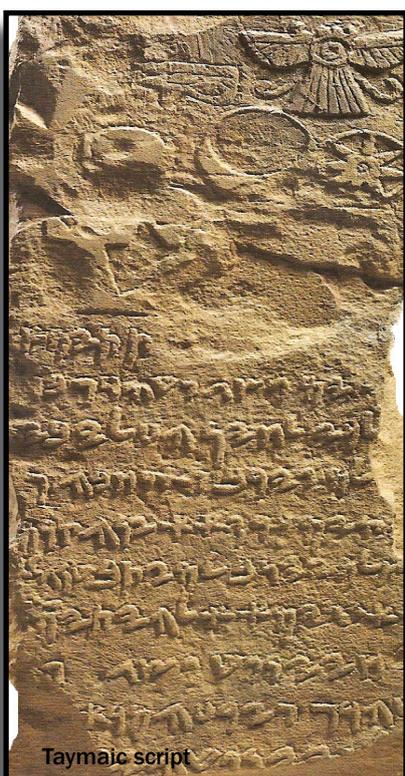
This is the area of the Ad people mentioned by Prophet Hud.

Ad inscriptions are found all over the Dhofar mountain valleys and in caves. Today the ancient Ad area is inhabited by Shihra and Mahra tribes, who still speak this ancient language. The Shihra tribe still today consider themselves as ancestors of the people of Ad. They were according to the Qu'ran the unbelieving inhabitants of Ubar, which disappeared in the sand and therefore also called "Atlantis of the desert".

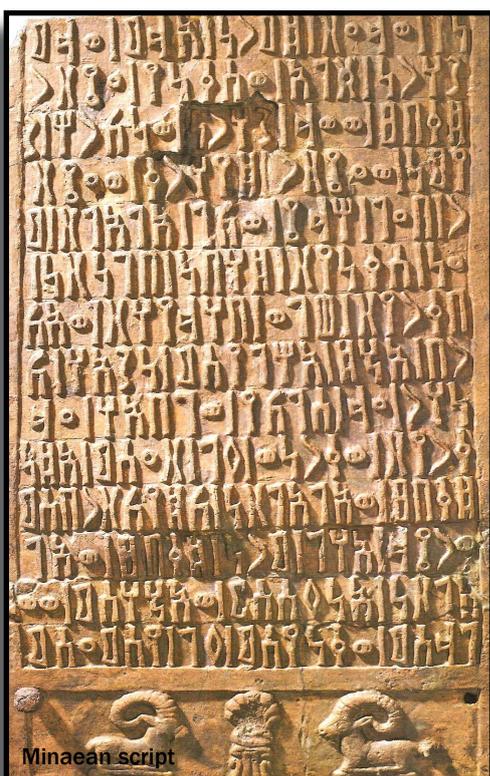
In the late 1990's Ubar was rediscovered north of Salalah today called Shisur, an ancient fort found to have collapsed into a huge natural underground cave. The language is more related to the east Semitic Akkadian and Eblaite, than to the neighboring south Semitic Himyarite and Sabaic.



Lihyan script



Taymaic script



Minaean script

