The earliest dated Arabic inscriptions.

Namāra (AD 328).

Zabād (AD 512).

Jabal Usayy (AD 520), after a new picture by Michael Macdonald.

Harrān (AD 568).
by the same Zuhayr as above, presumably also in 645 (Figure 10); and
in a tombstone from Egypt dated 31/652 (Figure 11 – compare, for
example, the short and elongated forms respectively used for ‘rahmat’
and ‘sanat’ in this inscription). This implies that the new convention
was still being standardized at the time.

The third orthographic improvement regards the long sound ‘ā’
in the middle of words. Before Islam, this had either been omitted or
noted with the same sign as medial yâ/ḥâ/ṯâ/ḥâ/nûn, a potential
source of confusion (in the Egyptian tombstone, for example, the first
word of line 6, ‘kitâb’, is written ‘k-t-b’). The modern convention,
using the letter alîf, first appears in an inscription from the region

10. (above) Second
inscription of Zuhayr,
carved on the same rock
as the previous one.

11. Tombstone of ‘Abd
al-Rahmân ibn Khayr
al-Hujjari (Egypt, Jumâda
II 31 / January–
February 652).
and geometrical rigour. Their uniformity in structure and writing suggests the conscious creation of a tradition. But when, and under what impetus? The answer to this question begins with the oldest surviving Islamic monument: the Dome of the Rock.

_The inscriptions at the Dome of the Rock_

The Dome of the Rock was built in 72/692 by the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (there has been some debate as to whether construction began or ended at that date). It contains the earliest extant Arabic monumental inscription, marking a watershed in our documentation of the script. Shortly before then, the material record still suggests a relatively primitive approach to writing. We have already mentioned the Ṭāʾif inscription of 678 and its kinship to Hijazi (Figure 12). In

the inscriptions from Khashna (dated 52/672, Figure 35) and Ḥafnāt al-Abād (64/684, Figure 36), one can observe a move towards more geometrical letters forms: straighter lines and approximate circles, rectangles or triangles. Even so, the script remains irregular in shape and size, and far removed from the interline codification of Kufic. Our evidence, however limited, suggests that the underlying reform of writing had not taken place by 684.
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15. (left) Inscription from Khashna ‘Hijaz, 52/672).
D.IV

1. **Alif** has a relatively flat lower return (though less so than in D.III), with a blunt end.

2. Initial 'ayn can either be slightly rounded, as in group D, or consist of a straight, oblique stroke placed at a sharp angle to the baseline, as in B.I.

3. **Mim** can sometimes bulge slightly below the baseline.

4. Final **nūn** has a short and relatively thick head; its lower return is short.

5. **Hā** consists of a rough semicircle leaning on a vertical bar; it tends to drop slightly below the line.

6. **Lām–alif** is sometimes reminiscent of D.I; alternatively, it can have two parallel vertical arms.
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Phoenician Alphabet