

continual wars between the Arabs and the princes of Turkestan." It would occupy too much time to follow the argument through all its details; the result is given in these words: "All that has hitherto been offered, and much more that might be added, seems evidently to prove, that the Mohammedans first went to China by sea."

The learned translator brings proof positive to show, that the Arabs did not steer by the compass: and gives it as his opinion that, at first, they only went to Malabar and Ceylon, but in time venturing farther than the Romans had been, they, from isle to isle, at length discovered the shores of China. Their kalifs (sic. C. S. G. M.) never endeavored to have potent fleets; they could have no temptation to make farther discoveries, or new conquests by sea, or to consult the interest of their trading subjects in foreign parts. Wherefore, it is very probable that the first adventurers who undertook this voyage, were urged thereto by the calamities of civil wars, which, having reduced many families to want, obliged them to seek a livelihood by trade. "Hence we may pretty clearly discern how the Mohammedans first got to China; and it seems that they did not force an admittance as elsewhere, but chiefly, insinuated themselves under the pretence of trade."

The sum of the whole seems to be, that the Mohammedans came to China at a very early period of their era, both by sea and land, but chiefly by sea, and almost solely for the sake of commerce.

We have no means of ascertaining the number of Mohammedans now in China (1832 C. S. G. M.); in the western parts of the empire their number is considerable, and everywhere they live unmolested in the exercise of their peculiar rites. Early in the last century (1700 C. S. G. M.) their number was "computed at about five hundred thousand."

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CHRISTIANS AND ARABIC WRITING.*

The first service which the Christian Arabs rendered Arabia was teaching the Arab tribes the art of writing. The history of Arabic writing and its sources testify to this fact. When Islam appeared in the second decade of the seventh century A. D., writing was not a new art in the Arabian Peninsula, as has been asserted by some. In reality writing was extant in some sections only to the exclusion of others. The people of Yaman had a kind of writing which they called *Musnad*, current among the Bani-Himyar. It has a marked resemblance to Ethiopic writing. The letters of this style of alphabet were detached from one another. In late years the European travellers, Carnot, Halevi and Glazer found thousands of traces of this writing, the earliest of which go back to a period of about four or five hundred years before Christ. Others are documents written in the centuries after Christ until the sixth century A. D. This writing, which these scholars discovered and published, is Sabean, not Arabic, as some like Ibn Khaldun have thought. (Ibn Khaldun—Paris Edition, Vol. 2, p. 341—"And the Himyar had a writing called Musnad, and from them the Mudar learned Arabic writing, but they did not become very much skilled in it.")

There was another script current in the north and west of Arabia, which is called the Nabatean. It appeared in two forms: one, the uncial, was boldly executed and stereotyped in form. It was common especially in North Arabia, and was used on coins and in architectural decoration. This is related to the Aramaic script called the *Astrangli*. The other form of the Nabatean is the cursive, commonly used in recording commercial transactions, deeds and similar documents. These two forms of

*Translated from Chapter 1 of Father Cheiko's Christian Literature in Arabia before Islam. (Arabic edition; the Jesuit Press, Beirut.)

the Nabatean are the origin of Arabic writing. The Arabs call it "*al-Jazm*," a name which they have taken from the nations surrounding them; and there are abundant proofs for the statement, that the Christians taught the Arabs the art of writing. Either they invented it, or they were the medium of transferring it from some other nation to the Arabs.

Arabs who have investigated the source of Arabic writing have ascribed it to men of Bawlân, of the tribe of Tai, who were of the Christian religion, living at Al-Anbar; and they put it in the form of the Syriac. (As-Suyuti says in Al-Muzhar, I, p. 39:—"The first to use our script, that is *al-Jazm*, were Maramir ibn Marra, Aslam ibn Sidra and Amir ibn Jadra, Arabs from Tai. They taught it to the people of Al-Anbar, and from them writing spread in 'Iraq, Hira and elsewhere. Bishr ibn Abd al-Malik, after he learned it, taught it to his friend Harb ibn Ummayya, with whom he had had commercial relations. These two travelled later to Mecca, where a number of the Quraish learned it from Harb, prior to the time of Islam. This script is called *al-Jazm* because it is *cut off*, or a branch of Himyari writing. Shardhami also learned a little of it from the Quraish. . . .")

Ibn Abbas is also quoted in Al-Fihrist as saying, "The first to write in Arabic were three men from Bawlân, which was a tribe inhabiting Al-Anbar. They together composed the connected and disconnected letters. Their names are Maramir ibn Marra (or Marwa), Aslam ibn Sidra and 'Amir ibn Jadra (or Jadla). Maramir shaped the letters, Aslam spaced and connected them, and 'Amir put on the vowel markings. The people of Hira on being asked, "From where did you obtain the Arabic writing," replied, "From the people of Al-Anbar." (Similarly there is the testimony of Ibn 'Abdu Rabbu in Al-'Aqd al-Farid, Vol. 2, page 205.) "They related that three men of Tai, Miramir ibn Marra, Aslam ibn Sidra and 'Amir ibn Jadra gathered at a certain spot and formed the (Arabic) writing, modeling the spelling after the

spelling of the Syriac. The people of Al-Anbar learned it; but when Islam came, only a few people were able to write Arabic." *Baladhuri* in *Futuh al-Buldan* (p. 471) makes the same statement, except that he says *Baqqa* instead of *Buq'a* (a spot). Baqqa was a city near Al-Anbar. He further remarks about Bishr: "Bishr ibn Abd al-Malik was the brother of Ukaidar ibn Abd al-Malik, ibn Abd al-Jann al-Kindi. As-Sakuni, a Christian, originally from Daumat Al-Jandal came to Hira, and remained there for some time. Now Bishr learned the Arabic script from the people of Hira. Thence he went to Mecca on business. Sufyan, ibn Umayya ibn Abu ash-Shams and Abu Qais, ibn Manaf, ibn Zohara, ibn Kilab, saw him writing and asked him to teach them the script, so he taught them how to spell. The three, Bishr, Sufyan and Abu Qais then went to Tayif with merchandise. Abu Ghailan ibn Salama, the Thaqfite, who accompanied them, learned the script. Later Bishr left the others and went to Diyar Madar, where "Amir ibn Zurara ibn 'Udas learned the script from him. 'Amr became known as 'Amr the Scribe. Bishr then came to Syria, where the people learned the script from him. A man of the tribe of Kalb was also taught by these three from Tai, who in turn taught it to the people of Wadi al-Qura. He came to Wadi al-Qura, and while he dwelt there he taught some of the inhabitants.

(Al Kindi, the poet, of Daumat Al-Jandal, in speaking to the Quraish said,

"Do not disavow the favors of men to you, for Maimum the Naqiba was most illustrious.

He brought the *Jazm* script, whereby you held fast the wealth you might have wasted.

And you saved that of which you had been neglectful, and stored up what might have been spent.

So in the continuous use of your pens, you imitated the writers of Kisra and Cæsar.

Until you dispensed with the Musnad of Himyar, and the sayings of Himyar were not recorded in books.")

This script was afterwards ascribed to Al-Kufa, when