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# TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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## THE QUR'ĀN AND ITS WORLD: V. LANGUAGE, THE UNCONSCIOUS AND THE "REAL WORLD"\*

Nearly half a century ago, E. Sepir noted that the "real world" is to a significant degree unconsciously constructed on the linguistic experience of particular groups and that the dissimilarity of languages reveals concealed, distinct worlds rather than a common world equipped with various labels [1]. In previously published articles in this series, we have touched several times on particular features of Qur'ānic language. The Qur'ān represents in many ways a unique document. Among other things, it scrupulously records the language in use at a certain time and in a certain

place, namely, the Arabic of the settled centres of Arabia in the first third of the seventh century. This language described the "real world" as it appeared to a person who lived then amid the fundamental changes, which had engulfed Arabian society and which, naturally, found their reflection in language. The question arises if there is any method which would help in reconstructing the "real world" of Muḥammad and his contemporaries, relying in our work on the linguistic material contained in the Qur'ān and taking into account the particular features of this document.

### 1

The question of Qur'ānic language as an independent problem was first formulated by J. Willmet [2], author of a dictionary of the Qur'ān, which appeared in Rotterdam as early as 1784. For many years, this question was of a primarily applied nature and was merely considered in the context of producing translations. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant view of Qur'ānic language in European scholarship was as the language of the Quraysh tribe, and at the same time the language of classical Arabic poetry. In supporting this view, European specialists relied on the opinion of the majority of medieval Arab philologists, who claimed that the Qurayshis and poets of pre-Islamic Arabia preserved the true, pure language of the Arabs. Karl Vollers seems to have made one of the earliest attempts to refute this view in a series of his articles (the first appeared in 1894) on the problem. These concluded in 1906 with a monograph which provoked a wide-ranging controversy about Qur'ānic language [3]. Vollers tried to prove that the texts which make up the Qur'ān were uttered by Muḥammad in the "spoken language" without final inflexions (*i'rāb*), that the "barbaric syntax" of the original can hardly be discerned from beneath the varnish which medieval Arab philologists applied to the text. Vollers' theory did not, however, receive significant scholarly support. In fact, it was only many years later that Paul Kahle introduced serious arguments in its favour [4].

The theory of Vollers' opponents — Th. Nöldeke and R. Geiger — was widely accepted among scholars [5]. Th. Nöldeke, supported in his views by F. Schwally, who re-worked his teacher's famous work "Geschichte des Korans" [6], advanced the following hypothesis: Qur'ānic Arabic represented a sort of artificial *Hochsprache* which was understood everywhere in the Ḥijāz. At the end of the 1940s, Nöldeke and Schwally's position came under criticism, and at least three specialists, Ch. Rabin, R. Blachère, and H. Fleish [7], argued that Qur'ānic Arabic was the literary, super-dialectal poetic language of Arabia — a poetic *koinē* — with some traces of the spoken language of Mecca. At present, this view is shared by a majority of specialists. Only J. Wansbrough objected this view [8], pointing out that almost nothing was known about Qur'ānic Arabic before the text assumed its final form. In his view, this took place only in the 3rd/9th century. The arguments, which were brought forward in the discussion, leave us with the impression that they most often rest on their authors' intuition and are supported by facts taken mainly from the works of medieval Muslim writers.

Recent studies in the Arabic language seem to provide scholars with much more solid arguments for the old controversy. Research on the differentiation and integration of dialects in pre-Islamic Arabia has shown that the highly developed structure and relatively stable and regular gram-

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\* Articles in the series "The Qur'ān and its World" were prepared with the support of the Russian Scientific Fund for Humanities.