When several distinct dialects so agree, the phenomenon in question must be of great antiquity. There are nevertheless traces which prove that the language once possessed more vowels, and the Aramaeans, for instance, with whom David fought may have pronounced many vowels which afterwards disappeared. Another peculiarity of Aramaic is that it lends itself far more readily to the linking together of sentences than Hebrew and Arabic. It possesses many conjunctions and adverbs to express slight modifications of meaning. It is also very free as regards the order of words. That this quality, which fenders it suitable for a clear and limpid prose style, is not the result of Greek influence may be seen by the Man- daean, on which Greek has left no mark. In its attempts to express everything clearly Aramaic often becomes prolix,—for example, by using additional personal and demonstrative pronouns. The contrast between Aramaic as the language of prose and Hebrew as the language of poetry is one which naturally strikes us, but we must beware of carrying it too far. Even the Aramaeans were not wholly destitute of poetical talent. Although the religious poetry of the Syrians has but little charm for us, yet real poetry occurs in the few extant fragments of Gnostic hymns. Moreover, in the modern dialects popular songs have been discovered which, though very simple, are fresh and full of feeling. It is therefore' by no means improbable that in ancient times Aramaic was used in poems which, being contrary to the theological tendency of Syrian civilization, were doomed to total oblivion.

*Arabic.*

The southern group of Semitic, languages consists of Arabic, Ethiopic and Mahri-Socotri. Arabic, again, is subdivided into the dialects of the larger portion of Arabia and those of the south (the Sabaean). At a very much earlier time than we were but lately justified in supposing, some of the northern Arabs reduced their language to writing. For travellers have recently discovered at al Ula in the northern Ḥijäz inscriptions in a hitherto unknown character, de­rived from the Sabaean (see below), which appear to have been written before our era. Since it is probable that Tlmj, the name of two kings mentioned in them, is **IlτoλeμαΓos,** we are directed to the Hellenistic period, and other cir­cumstances confirm this conjecture. These inscriptions have been called “ Thamudic,” because they were found in the country of the Thamūd; but this designation is scarcely a suitable one, because during the period when the power of the Thamūd was at its height, and when the buildings mentioned in the Koran were hewn in the rocks, the language of this country was Nabataean (see above). A more commendable proposal is to call the inscriptions Lihyānī, since the tribe of Lihyãn is sometimes mentioned in them. Unfortunately the inscriptions hitherto discovered are all short and for the most part fragmentary, and consequently furnish but little material to the student of languages. But there can be no doubt that they are written in an Arabic dialect. The treatment of the dentals, among other things, is a sufficient

proof of this.

In some districts of the northern IJiiãz and the neighbouring portion of Nejd, other brief inscriptions, for the most part cursorily scratched upon rocks, have been discovered. These have been— not very happily—named “ Proto-Arabic,” while the title Thamudie has been proposed for them also. Their writing is a somewhat later form of the Lihyānī, and the dialect, as well, seems to be very similar to Lihyãnï. Unfortunately, the brevity of the inscriptions, which generally contain only proper names, together with the incertitude of the meaning of many, does not allow an accurate insight into their language.

To the first centuries of the Christian era belong the thousands of Arabic inscriptions, found in the wild, rocky districts south-east of Damascus, which are commonly termed Safaitic, after Safa, a locality in their neighbourhood. For the most part, these also are short fugitive pieces scratched on rough stones, though a few of them show more careful execution. Their writing is, again, a later stage of development of the Sabaean. The task of decipherment was at first rendered extremely difficult by the scanty number of exemplars and the lack of perfectly exact facsimiles. To this must be added the fact that the Safaites insert extraordinarily few vowel letters. But the zeal of several scholars and the ever increasing number of good copies have rapidly brought us farther towards the goal; and we now know the language of the Safa inscriptions much better than that of the Lihyānī and“ Proto-Arabic,”—to which it stands in a close relationship. Although the inscriptions yield us no information as to unknown events of importance, still they teach us much with regard to the life and occupation of Arabian tribes who seem to have been subsequently displaced by others. The great mass of proper names, alone, is enough to make them of value to the philologist.

The Arabs who inhabited the Nabataean kingdom wrote in Aramaic, but, as has been remarked above, their native language, Arabic, often shows through the foreign disguise. We arc thus able to satisfy ourselves that these Arabs, who lived a little before and a little after Christ, spoke a dialect closely resembling the later classical Arabic. The nominative of the so-called “ triptote ” nouns has, nearly as in classical Arabic, the termination ū or ō; the genitive

has *ī* (the accusative therefore probably ended in *ā*), but without the addition of *n*. Generally speaking, those proper names which in classical Arabic are “ diptotes ” are here devoid of any inflexional termination. The *ū* of the nominative appears also in Arabic proper names belonging to more northern districts, as, for example, Palmyra and Edessa, All these Arabs were probably of the same race. It is possible that the inscription of Nemara, south-east of Damascus, Arabic, but in Nabataean letters, dating from a.d. 328, and the two oldest known specimens of distinctively Arabic writing— namely, the Arabic portion of the trilingual inscription of Zabad, south-east of Haleb (Aleppo), written in Syriac, Greek and Arabic, and dating from 512 or 513 a.d., and that of the bilingual inscription of Harrān, south of Damascus, written in Greek and Arabic, of 568—represent nothing but a somewhat more modern form of this dialect. In these inscriptions proper names take in the genitive the termination *it,* which shows that the meaning of such inflexions was no longer felt. The three inscriptions have not yet been satisfactorily interpreted in all their details.

During the whole period of the preponderance of Aramaic this language exercised a great influence upon the vocabulary of the Arabs. The more carefully we investigate the more clearly does it appear that numerous Arabic words, used for ideas or objects which presuppose a certain degree of civilization, are borrowed from the Aramaeans. Hence the civilizing influence of their northern neigh­bours must have been very strongly felt by the Arabs, and contri­buted in no small measure to prepare them for playing so important a part in the history of the world.

In the 6th century the inhabitants of the greater part of Arabia proper spoke everywhere essentially the same language, which, as being by jar the most important of all Arabic dialects, is known simply as the Arabic language. Arabic poetry, at that time cultivated throughout the whole of central and northern Arabia as far as the lower Euphrates and even beyond it, employed one language only. The extant Arabic poems belonging to the heathen period were not indeed written down till much later, and meanwhile underwent considerable alterations; but the absolute regularity of the metre and rhyme is a sufficient proof that on the whole these poems all obeyed the same laws of language. It is indeed highly probable that the rhapsodists and the grammarians have effaced many slight dialectical peculiarities; in a great number of passages, for example, the poems may have used, in accordance with the fashion of their respective tribes, some other case than that prescribed by the grammarians, and a thing of this kind may aftcr- wards have been altered, unless it happened to occur in rhyme; but such alterations cannot have extended very far. A dialect that diverged in any great measure from the Arabic of the grammarians could not possibly have been made to fit into the metres. More-, over, the Arabic philologists recognize the existence of various small distinctions between the dialects of individual tribes and of their poets, and the traditions of the more ancient schools of Koran readers exhibit very many dialectical *nuances.* It might indeed be con­jectured that for the majority of the Arabs the language of poetry was an artificial one,—the speech of certain tribes having; been adopted by all the rest as a *dialectus poētica.* And this might be possible in the case of wandering minstrels whose art gained them their livelihood, such as Nãbigha and A'shā. But, when we find that the Bedouin goat-herds, for instance, in the mountainous district near Mecca composed poems in this very same language upon their insignificant feuds and personal quarrels, that in it the proud chiefs of the Taghlibites and the Bekrites addressed defiant verses to the king of Hīra (on the Euphrates), that a Christian inhabitant of Hīra, Adī b. Zaid, used this language in his serious poems,—when we reflect that, as far as the Arabic poetry of the heathen period extends, there is nowhere a trace of any important linguistic difference, it would surely be a paradox to assume that all these Arabs, who for the most part were quite illiterate and yet extremely jealous of the honour of their tribes, could have taken the trouble to clothe their ideas and feelings in a foreign, or even a perfectly artificial, language. The Arabic philologists also invariably regarded the language of the poets as being that of the Arabs in general. Even in the 3rd century after Mahomet the Bedouins of Arabia proper, with the exception of a few outlying districts, were considered as being in possession of this pure Arabic. The most learned grammarians were in the habit of appealing to any uneducated man who happened to have just arrived with his camels from the desert, though he did not know by heart twenty verses of the Koran, and had no conception of theoretical grammar, in order that he might decide whether in Arabic it were allowable or necessary to express oneself in this or that manner. It is evident that these profound scholars knew of only one classical language, which was still spoken by the Bedouins. The tribes which produced the principal poets of the earlier period belonged for the most part to portions of the Ḥijāz, to Najd and its neighbourhood, and to the region which stretches thence towards the Euphrates. A great part of the Ḥijaz, on the other hand, plays a very unimportant part in this poetry, and the Arabs of the north-west, who were under the Roman dominion, have no share whatever in it. The dialects of these latter tribes probably diverged farther from the ordinary language. The fact that they were Christians does not explain this, since the Taghlibïtes and other tribes who produced eminent poets