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SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University. This is Trending Globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin. In the middle of the Jordanian desert, sit thousands of rocks carved with inscriptions in an ancient form of Arabic. Their meaning has long been a mystery, but one night in 2013, Ahmad Al-Jallad, an expert in the early history of Arabic managed to decipher a few key words in the inscriptions. By morning, he'd made a major breakthrough.

ELIAS MUHANNA: He had basically assembled this entire zodiac. This entire way of referring to different constellations that was the zodiac we didn't know existed. It was an Arabian zodiac.

SARAH BALDWIN: That's Elias Muhanna, a professor of Comparative Literature in the Watson Institute's Middle East Studies program. He wrote about Al-Jallad for The New Yorker in May 2018. Al-Jallad's work has been part of a recent explosion in our understanding of pre-Islamic language and culture in the Arabian Peninsula. I spoke with Muhanna about Al-Jallad's groundbreaking research and how it's helped recast common narratives of early Arabic history. I started by asking him how they first met.

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ELIAS MUHANNA: So Ahmad and I met actually in graduate school, but he was really a kind of a prodigy. He had this incredible talent for languages, he was self-taught in many ways.

SARAH BALDWIN: Right, and not just any language, right?

ELIAS MUHANNA: Exactly. He had studied. He taught himself classical Arabic and Hebrew, and a lot of ancient languages, and had discovered his passion for ancient history and language while he was in college, and I had been kind of interested in him and his research and his ideas just when we were graduate school buddies, and I kind of followed his career after he finished and went on to be a professor of Semitic Linguistics at Leiden University in the Netherlands.

SARAH BALDWIN: And so what is his work about? Talk about these alphabets and these ancient languages and why they're important, especially in the context of the history of Arabic and the history of Islam.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Right. So his work is really exciting because it deals with this enormous trove of inscriptions

that are written on rocks in the middle of the desert. In the Jordanian desert, there's a part of the desert that is completely black basically. It's a basalt desert. The result of these volcanic eruptions. Hundreds and hundreds of thousands, millions of years ago actually.

SARAH BALDWIN: The [? Hura. ?]

ELIAS MUHANNA: The [? Hura. ?] Yeah. And it covers-- there's several of these volcanic deserts in northern Saudi Arabia and in eastern Jordan, and at some point, you know people Bedouins, goat herds, began writing inscriptions on these rocks. This is like 2000 years ago. So it's before the revelation of Islam, before the region becomes Islamized, and for hundreds of years, nobody could read these things. They didn't know what they were. And to this day, actually, people who live in Jordan many people who live in that area assume that these inscriptions are written in Turkish or written in some other language because they are written using glyphs like an alphabet that looked like runes.

So people didn't really know what these texts were, and at some point in the 19th century, they were deciphered. Orientalist took a crack at it, and basically began to decipher the texts, and realized that they were some kind of a form of Arabic. But they weren't written in the Arabic script because the Arabic script hadn't been invented yet. I mean that would come like hundreds of years later.

SARAH BALDWIN: And can you describe, what is the technical term for that kind of writing?

ELIAS MUHANNA: Well, so the name of the end of the alphabet is called safaitic because it was first discovered in the vicinity of a place called Safa, Tulul Al-Safa in southern Syria. And I think the term that you're referring to is boustrophedon, so that means a style of writing where the words wrap back and forth. It's not like left to right or right to left.

SARAH BALDWIN: So like an ox turning.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Like an ox turning.

SARAH BALDWIN: I thought that was so interesting.

ELIAS MUHANNA: So the script is deciphered, but for a long time, the study of these inscriptions kind of languished because very few people work on them, and they've deciphered the script, but they don't really know, they still can't really make sense of the language and the culture that produced these inscriptions. So Ahmad comes along and he's taught by the world's foremost

scholar who works on these inscriptions, Michael McDonald.

I mean, Michael basically took him under his wing and in a very much like an oral tradition, taught him how to work with these kinds of texts. And it's funny because Michael himself had been taught by a former a previous scholar who was kind of an independent scholar, and the chain of transmission had passed that way all the way back into the 19th century.

SARAH BALDWIN: Wow, it's almost like an apprenticeship.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Exactly. Very much like that, yeah. What's interesting about this scholarship is that it's very slow and it's very laborious, and you have to spend a lot of time with texts that you don't really understand. And you have to keep them all in your head, just in case there's a moment when something is going to click. And I think Ahmad described that experience of working at home in Leiden, and just going over these inscriptions.

And something clicked for him one night when he was reading some inscriptions that contained words that had previously been translated as proper nouns, as place names. And that's kind of a cheat, when you don't know what something means, often you say, well, maybe it was the name of a place. There were a bunch of these inscriptions that had words in them, but they really had no explanation for what the words were.

And he noticed that they all had a mention of traveling in search of rain. And it just kind of hit him that maybe they weren't place names on the ground, but they referred to constellations because certain constellations would be seen in the sky at different times of the year, and so maybe they were somehow references to the seasons, which could be a reference to seasonal migration in search of rain across the desert going to different places.

SARAH BALDWIN: So navigating by the stars in a way.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Navigating by the stars and going-- yeah. Going places, well really time telling, calendrical telling, so that we traveled to such and such a place when Aries was in this part of the sky, or whatever. And he started to collect every one of these inscriptions that he had flagged as containing words that you don't really know, and behold, many of them were related to this theme of migration. And so he worked all night long and by the end of the night, he had basically assembled this entire zodiac, this entire way of referring to different constellations that was a zodiac we didn't know existed it was an Arabian zodiac.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

And so that kind of work I think is really exciting and we don't do a whole lot of it. We don't associate that scientific/humanistic way of approaching history so much anymore, and so I found it really exciting and wanted to know more about it.

SARAH BALDWIN: He's so young and he sounds so old in his story, right.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Yes. Yeah, he's quite a fascinating individual. One of the things that Ahmad often talks about is the difficulty of knowing what Arabia was like around the time that Mohammed lived, right? So around the early seventh century. And so what sources do we turn to explain to really tell that history. And invariably, we turn to chronicles that were written by historians, Muslim historians, living usually a couple of centuries after the death of Muhammad. So historians are really bound by-- contemporary historians-- are constrained by the evidence that we have.

We have a huge amount of so-called literary evidence. We have a lot of chronicles, and we have a wealth of information, and that has traditionally been the source for how we try to reconstruct early Islamic history. But because the Arabian Peninsula, basically Saudi Arabia, for most of let's say the 19th the 20th century has been kind of off limits to other kinds of inquiry, other kinds of exploration, like archeology, basically. There hasn't been a whole lot of documentary evidence, the kinds of things that historians would ideally like to have in addition to literary sources.

So in those places up in the north, in Syria and in Iraq and Jordan and in Lebanon and stuff, there's been a ton-- and you know, Palestine, Israel-- there's been a ton of archaeological excavation. In fact, archeology there in Egypt that's where the field of archeology really prospered, grew. But in Mecca, Medina, certainly, there have not been a lot of excavations. For understandable reasons.

That has begun to change, but really in the past 10 years or so, there's been really a boom of archaeological excavation across the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, Oman, a lot of places.

SARAH BALDWIN: What are they trying to prove?

ELIAS MUHANNA: Well it's hard to say. I mean, the archaeologists I spoke to many of them felt that there was an interest on the part of ministries of culture and museums in exploring their countries like pre-Islamic heritage as a way of-- I mean, when you look to the northern Arab countries, again

Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, actually, also, they've always they've celebrated their let's say, Muslim heritage, as well as a pre-Islamic heritage. So that the Egyptians can point to the pyramids and say, well, we were civilized long before the arrival of Islam.

And the Lebanese can point to Baalbekk, the Roman ruins, and say, we were we were Roman or we were a Phoenician at one point, and the Syrians the same thing that can point to Palmyra. The Jordanians point to Petra, all these civilizations that existed before the Islamic invasions. And for the longest time, the countries of the Arabian Gulf, Persian Gulf, really kind of started their histories with Islam. It was like that was the beginning of civilization, and we've seen a real shift in recent years where there's been a real interest in exploring what came before.

And I think for a long time, there was an assumption that nothing came before, or that there had been a Bedouin culture there. And so there was a culture of some kind, but it wasn't a so-called civilized culture. It wasn't a sedentary culture. It didn't produce monuments, so there was no way to recapture that. And I think that there's been a realization that that's just not true. That there were in fact fascinating, very advanced civilizations across the peninsula.

We'd always known that there had been those kinds of civilizations in places like Yemen, where they had left monumental inscriptions and large buildings, and so there was real evidence of advanced civilizations there, but in Saudi Arabia, there was kind of an assumption that it was well, it's just desert until Islam came, basically. If you ask 100 people about this, you might get 100 ever answers, but I think that it's safe to say that there is a mystique associated for many Muslims with the idea of something being born in the desert where it couldn't have been influenced by some other outside thing, that accrues to its miraculous nature that the Quran was revealed to somebody who many believe was illiterate, the prophet.

So he didn't write it himself, it had to be a miracle that it came to him. And what's really interesting is to see how, I think this kind of evidence really raises questions about what we can learn about the culture that the first audience of the Quran, the first audience the first Muslims. The more we learn about that culture, the more we can really begin to understand actually the ways in which it was the way in which these texts actually did emerge out of something. That's what makes this research really exciting, but also potentially sensitive.

SARAH BALDWIN: Has he gotten push back to your knowledge?

ELIAS MUHANNA: He has not, I mean, I follow his-- he's very active now on social media. And if anything, his work has been really kind of gobbled up by people in the region. And that's one of the things that I think he's found really exciting is that he is constantly receiving photographs from amateur archaeologists in Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, like, there is this inscription near my house and I took a picture of it and what do you think of this?

And so [INAUDIBLE] the linguist in Paris that I spoke to said, it's just amazing. I get emails all the time from people across the region saying, I took a photograph of this inscription, and here it is. Here is the coordinates, and so we're really living in a moment where all this scriptural evidence is coming to the fore now.

SARAH BALDWIN: It's so cool. It's like it was always out there we just needed someone to read it.

ELIAS MUHANNA: We needed someone to read it and we needed a way to circulate it easily. So I think it's a story of technology.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well that's what interests me in your essay as well. It's so quintessentially you, right? It's ancient and literary and digital.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Right, so the proliferation of camera phones, social media, people being able to share, all this stuff, and the speed of it. It took like 100 years for the script to be deciphered, and it circulated exclusively in like scholarly journals and things. People would argue over what the word meant for 30 years, basically, because that was the pace at which it happened.

But now, I mean Ahmad posts a picture of an unpublished inscription that someone has sent him that he's studied. He posts it on Twitter, and you would not believe the people who come out of the woodwork and say, it must mean this or it must mean that--

SARAH BALDWIN: Like amateur philologist?

ELIAS MUHANNA: Amateur philologist, and--

SARAH BALDWIN: I didn't know there was such a thing

ELIAS MUHANNA: --yeah. It turns out there's a lot. There's a lot of really big epigraphy buffs, and people who, I mean, not all the inscriptions are written in languages only he can read, or in scripts that only he can read. Some of them are in early Arabic, and so it's really interesting.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, so tell me about going to the desert with him in 2017. What was that trip like? I mean, it

sounds like you're walking like it's a library on the ground. And you are walking and all the books are open.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Yeah.

SARAH BALDWIN: Is that over stating it?

ELIAS MUHANNA: No. I mean it's kind of like that. I flew out to Amman, and I didn't really know what to expect.

He and I are really good friends, and so I was looking forward to hanging out with him, but I had no sense of what it was going to be like. So we got in a car with him and [INAUDIBLE] who is a professor, a researcher who was then based at Oxford. Jordanian. And we all kind of jumped in a car, and drove out. Basically drove east on the road that runs from Amman to Baghdad. So it's like this two lane road.

And we just kept driving out into the desert, and at this point, there was a lot of activity. I mean, we were like 30 or 40 miles, maybe 20 or 30 miles at one point, from the Syrian border, and this is when ISIS was really active in Syria still, it hadn't been defeated. And they were all clustered just north of the border, and there were airstrikes and mean there were fighter jets flying over us.

[JET FLYING]

[INAUDIBLE] into Syria from Jordan. A lot of military activity happening at the time. And there were smugglers and the town we were in was really kind of like a one horse town that was very much a smuggler's town, there was cars racing through with tinted windows. And we stayed on a military base, a Jordanian military base where that had a sort of a ramshackle Research Institute that had seen better days and in the 90s.

It was all very kind of Spartan, but it was great. I mean we'd get up early in the morning and go out into the desert. We had a Bedouin guide, and we would just pull off a highway and drive for about an hour into the desert.

SARAH BALDWIN: Did you have a GPS coordinates that you were trying to find?

ELIAS MUHANNA: So, yeah we did. And Ali, the other researcher on the team, knew this area like the back of his hand. And we would walk around, and to me, it was just undifferentiated basalt. Rocks everywhere. But he really knew where we were, and he would like look at different hills and

he'd know where people had been before, where previous excavations have gone, and he knew what you know which hills had been published in which the journals, which findings and so on.

So he had a very clear sense of where he wanted to go. And yeah, so we got out there and then we just kind of walk. And we'd usually walk towards hills because that's where a lot of the inscriptions were clustered. So you have to imagine these huge tribes would arrive, would come north, and they would bring all their animals with them. And this area is completely-- it's a big desert now, but you have to imagine 2000 years ago, it was a savanna.

So although there are all these basalt rocks, it was really pasture land. And over time, there is a process of desertification that really transforms these landscapes. So they would bring all their animals and they would let them basically pasture there. And the shepherds would want to be up on higher ground so they could keep an eye on predators and also anybody who was coming to raid or anything like that. And that's where they would spend their time, and so that's where we'd find all these like graffiti, basically, on these rocks.

SARAH BALDWIN: So it was like graffiti. What were they using?

ELIAS MUHANNA: They're using flint. So flint is very hard and very sharp, and they would use that to etch these messages on the rocks. And the word graffiti doesn't like to use it so much. For the longest time, that's how they were described. That's how they were written about in the sources. He doesn't like to use that term because graffiti we think of as an informal practice.

And so you just see random letters on walls, and that's graffiti. And for him, he's really thinks of it as a formalized form of monumentality, that there is a real grammar to these things and they fall in patterns, and it's a memorializing activity.

SARAH BALDWIN: Yeah I got that sense from your article that it has a memorializing function. That it has amusing or even artistic poetic function, but also I thought was so interesting this idea of monumentality being in our minds like a Greco Roman concept of largeness and expressiveness. And yet, something small and etched can also have a monumental function.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Yeah, for sure. That's very much something that he stresses that we come out of the field with our own ideas about what monumentality looks like, what memorials are supposed to look like, and we have to adjust our preconceptions. So they have cameras and every time they see an inscription, they take a picture of it and it goes into the database, and it has its coordinates and

everything.

So GIS technology has evolved tremendously just in the past 15 years, and so now, a lot of these inscriptions that are in the database have all this additional information so it enables you to do lots of things. It enables you to track the movements of some of the tribes because a lot of the inscriptions have the names of the people who wrote them. In fact, sometimes that's all they have. Like so-and-so was here. And when they say so-and-so is here, it's not

SARAH BALDWIN: Kilroy.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Kilroy. It's like Kilroy, son of and then all these grand, grandson of and it goes for generations of generations. If you can imagine, having a database, and there's 50,000 of these things. So if you can track these names and maybe track the families, you can basically begin to have a picture of where they moved and why.

SARAH BALDWIN: In your lifetime?

ELIAS MUHANNA: Oh Yeah, for sure. I think so. It's just a matter of putting it all in one place, but it is right now in one digital database, but I think there's more that can be done with it. There's different kinds of search functionality.

SARAH BALDWIN: Does his work affect your scholarship? I mean you're comparative literature, but you're also a historian, you study knowledge.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Yeah, I've always been interested in language and especially the history of the Arabic language, and that was one of the things that drew me to Ahmad's work when we were in graduate school. And so it does intersect strongly with my own work. Not so much my most recent publications, but my next project, which deals with the history of the Arabic language and the vernacular. And the differences between spoken language and written language and how those two things interact with each other throughout the history of the Middle East. So, yeah, it does intersect strongly with one of my big research interests.

SARAH BALDWIN: Do you think you might collaborate ever, the two of you?

ELIAS MUHANNA: Well we're trying to-- we're working together a little bit on this big corpus, which is called OCIANA, the online corpus of inscriptions from ancient North Arabia. And it's based at Oxford, and we're trying to work worked together on bringing Browns. So Brown is a leader in the field of digital epigraphy, we're one of the best places to be for that kind of thing and we have a

couple of major projects on ancient inscriptions.

Digital corpora of ancient Egyptians based here at Brown, and so we have a lot of expertise on how to build these corpora and bring them up to date. So we're hoping to maybe collaborate a little bit on turning the functionality of that corpus, raising it a little bit because the technology has changed so much in recent years.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SARAH BALDWIN: Yes, thank you so much for coming and talking with us.

ELIAS MUHANNA: Thank you, it was a pleasure.

SARAH BALDWIN: I hope you'll come back. This episode of Trending Globally was produced by Babette Thomas, John Maza, Dan Richards, and Alex La Ferrier. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm your host, Sarah Baldwin. You can subscribe to us on iTunes, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast app. If you like what you hear, leave us a rating and a review on iTunes. It really helps others find the show.

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